

Environmental Analysis

Public Involvement

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APPLICABILITY

Public involvement is a general term that describes GDOT's effort to reach out to the public with information about a proposed project, typically through virtual outreach or in-person open house meetings. If the project includes one or more of the following, then public involvement is usually required:

- > Displacements – Such as commercial or residential relocations, including those resulting from loss of driveway access or parking.
- > Access changes – Such as new medians, roadway closures, added turn restrictions, railroad closures, roadway diets/lane reductions, displaced left-turn intersections, or R-cuts. R-cuts that are a drive to a business require only targeted outreach.
- > Major project type – Such as widening to add travel or passing lanes, new location roadway, changes to an interstate, changing the designation of a roadway to a state route, multi-use trail on new location, or capital improvement project.
- > Disruptive activities during construction – Such as an off-site detour required for 30 days or more (detours under 30 days may only require mailer notification prior to letting the project). Also includes walking / biking trails that are closed during construction.
- > Potential for public controversy – Such as installation of a multi-lane roundabout or diverging diamond interchange in an area unfamiliar with these features, or if the project involves significant loss of front yards, parking, or driveways.
- > Section 4(f) considerations – Such as the need for a Programmatic or Individual Section 4(f) Evaluation. 23 CFR 774.5(b) States that *de minimis* findings for public

parks, recreation areas, wildlife and waterfowl refugees require an opportunity for public review and comment concerning the effects on the protected activities, features, or attributes of the property. *De minimis* findings for this type of project requires feedback from the official with jurisdiction, and Programmatic/ regular 4(f) requires Virtual Public Involvement (VPI). *De minimis* findings for Cultural Resources do not require public outreach.

- > Other considerations – Such as the need for an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), the installation of noise barriers, restriping of the interstate, bus stop closures, if it has been over three years since the last public involvement and the environmental document has not been approved, and other applicable considerations.

The plan for the project may call for public input on the project alternatives early in its development. The list above is not exhaustive. The Environmental Analyst should always be alert to other circumstances where public involvement would help advance the project.

Project types that typically do not require public involvement

- > Signing and marking
- > Projects that do not lead to construction
- > Installation of fencing, signs, pavement markings, small passenger shelters, traffic signals, and railroad warning devices where no substantial land acquisition or traffic disruption will occur
- > Bike and/or pedestrian lanes, paths along existing transportation facility
- > Emergency repairs
- > Railroad signing and marking
- > Resurfacing and/or roadway maintenance activities
- > Broadband and/or fiber optic projects in existing ROW
- > Turn lanes
- > Hardship and/or protective buys
- > Utility installations across or along ROW
- > Environmental restoration projects
- > Low Impact Bridge Program projects

REGULATIONS, GUIDANCE, AND POLICY

Title 40 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) requires that agencies make a diligent public involvement effort, following NEPA procedures during the environmental phase of project delivery. NEPA regulations also require agencies to provide notice to the public of hearings, public meetings, and the availability of environmental documents for review.

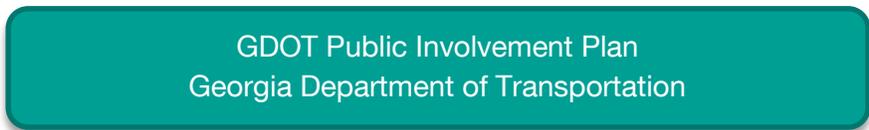
Table 1 – Laws, Policies, and Executive Orders Related to Public Involvement

Name	Purpose
Title VI - (Section 42 USC 2000) - 1964	Prevents discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin.
Rehabilitation Act – 1973/ADA of 1990 (Section 504 29 USC 790)	Protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability.
Federal-Aid Highway Act - 1973 (Section 23 USC 324)	Prevents discrimination based on gender.
Age Discrimination Act - 1975 (42 USC 6101)	Prevents discrimination based on age.
FHWA Title VI Regulations -1976 (Section 23 CFR Part 200)	Identifies specific actions and attributes to ensure compliance.

The environmental regulations of the US Department of Transportation (USDOT), the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) were adopted to implement NEPA requirements for surface transportation projects and include requirements for public input in the project development process. Under 23 CFR 771, agencies involved with federally funded transportation activities must:

- > Make decisions in the overall public interest;
- > Inform the public and other governmental entities and involve them in the decision-making process;
- > Publish legal notices; and
- > Provide opportunity for public hearings.

Additionally, through the Georgia Federal-Aid Stewardship and Oversight Agreement, GDOT developed a detailed Public Involvement Plan to outline expectations for all GDOT projects requiring public involvement activities.



TYPES OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

GDOT public involvement is typically conducted through web-based outreach or in-person open houses. It is usually held during the Concept Phase, and multiple public involvement efforts may be needed for a project. The type of public involvement is determined by the Environmental Analyst and the Project Manager (PM) and may require coordination with OES leadership or FHWA. In general, there are three types of public involvement, as detailed below. Figure 1 provides a flow chart to illustrate how to determine the applicable public involvement.

Virtual Public Involvement (VPI)

VPI uses web-based tools to provide the public with access to information about a proposed project, including project details, information slides, layouts, and other information if applicable (such as detour routes). It also provides the public with the opportunity to provide their feedback and receive a response from GDOT. Feedback may be provided through the project's website as well as by email, mail, or phone call during the comment period, which is typically 30 days long.

Public Information Open House (PIOH)

A PIOH is held in person at a location near the project corridor. The project team sets up displays and information boards and is available to answer questions. Feedback may be provided in person via a comment form; or be mailed, emailed, or submitted through the project's website during the comment period. Typically, the comment period is 10 days long. Project information is also included on the project website similar to a VPI.

Public Hearing Open House (PHOH)

If the project requires an EA or an EIS, the opportunity to hold a PHOH must be advertised following FHWA's approval of the EA or the Draft EIS. If a PHOH is requested, it is held following a similar format as the PIOH. The purpose of the PHOH is to provide the public with the opportunity to review the environmental document while also reviewing the project.

Other Public Involvement Format Considerations

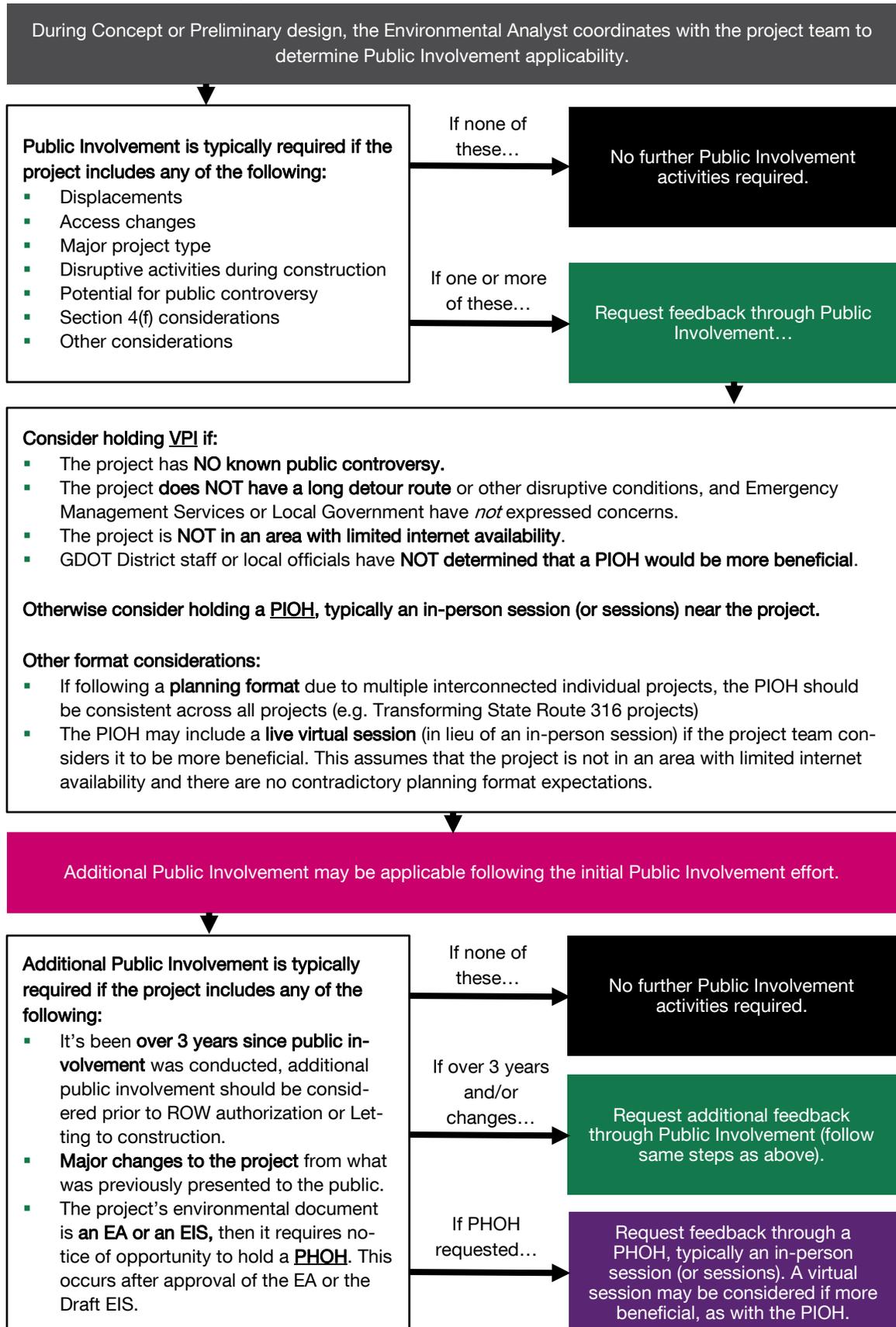
The project team should be aware if the project is following a planning format that must be consistent with other interconnected individual projects, such as the Transforming State Route 316 projects. Additionally, depending on the project circumstances, the project team may consider substituting the in-person PIOH or PHOH for a live virtual session with a question-and-answer discussion with the public. The project team may also consider a hybrid approach that includes an in-person open house and a live virtual session. For larger projects, the project team may hold multiple open houses along the project corridor to ensure meaningful opportunities for public participation.

District Coordination

For certain project types, the project team should defer to the judgement of district personnel when determining the best type of Public Involvement. These projects are as follows:

- > Roadway diet projects / lane reductions – VPI required but PIOH may be beneficial.
- > Changing the designation of a roadway to a State Route – VPI required but PIOH may be beneficial.
- > Roundabout – Public involvement may not be required. However, if there are no other roundabouts in the area, VPI or a PIOH may be needed due to potential for controversy.

Figure 1: Determine the Type of Public Involvement Applicable



On EIS-level projects and other projects where coordination with the public is anticipated to be complicated, the Environmental Analyst is expected to prepare a project-specific Public Involvement Plan (PIP) document to outline the public involvement approach for the project and anticipate related issues. See details in the call-out box below.

Project-specific Public Involvement Plan

What is it? A project-specific PIP is a document created by the Environmental Analyst outlining the public involvement goals, strategy, and deliverables for a specific project.

When to create one? A project-specific PIP should be created for EIS-level projects as part of scoping and identifying interested parties. FHWA regulations describe the PIP as part of the project's Coordination Plan, which also includes agency coordination. The PIP may be needed for EA- or CE-level projects depending on the anticipated project needs. Example: State Route 316 projects all followed a common PIP regardless of NEPA document type.

What is included? A PIP should include a detailed explanation of the public involvement goals and ways to achieve them. This should include all milestones and deliverables, such as Open Houses and related materials; as well as reports related to Community Impact Assessments. A PIP should identify project stakeholders and their level of involvement, as well as additional outreach outside of the Open House or VPI. The PIP may be adjusted as needed throughout project development.

Formal FHWA deliverable? For EIS-level projects, a PIP should be submitted to OES as a formal deliverable early in project development (during Concept or early Preliminary Design). FHWA may request a review of the PIP at this stage. However, a formal version of the PIP must be included in the DEIS submittal for FHWA review. For non-EIS-level projects, if a PIP is warranted, it should be submitted to OES for review and used as a guidance document throughout the project but does not require approval by FHWA.

How is this different from the GDOT PIP? The GDOT Public Involvement Plan is a GDOT-wide strategy document, while a project-specific PIP is a planning document for individual projects.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT WORKFLOW AND WORKSHEET

To prepare for public involvement, the Environmental Analyst (GDOT or consultant or both) will follow the workflow described below and employ the Public Involvement Worksheet to track their progress. The worksheet discusses roles and responsibilities, public involvement materials, and submittal timing, and it also provides a step-by-step document to be completed as a collaborative effort between the GDOT PM and the Environmental Analyst.

Be aware that if the project is a local let, the workflow may follow a similar pattern, but the review requirements may be different. Likewise, the materials may not be included on the

GDOT website but might be included on a local government website. The local government would be responsible for collecting comments and providing responses via a response letter on local letterhead, which does not require an OES OH signature. All GDOT logos should be replaced with an acceptable logo from the local government. Local government public involvement requires GDOT oversight to ensure satisfactory deliverables and compliance with GDOT policy.

Step 1 – Kick-off Meeting (held 4 to 6 months prior to public involvement)

Once the GDOT PM, District Planning and Programming Liaison (DPPL), and GDOT Environmental Analyst identify the need for public involvement, they should make preparations using the Public Involvement Worksheet. As a first step, 4 to 6 months prior to the anticipated date for the public involvement, the GDOT Environmental Analyst requests the PM to schedule a public involvement Kick-off Meeting. At the Kick-off:

- > The Consultant NEPA Analyst will complete the Title VI research and discuss known risk factors and special considerations, such as English language proficiency in the area, access to internet, ROW takes, controversy, etc. and work with the DPPL to make note of any special advertising or meeting needs.
- > Fill out Step 1 of the Worksheet and decide on dates for the public involvement website and the end of comment period. This includes the dates for the public involvement materials to be submitted, revised, and approved. All dates and responsible parties must be recorded on the Worksheet.

Step 2 – Materials Review (submitted 6 to 8 weeks prior to public involvement)

If consultants (including the design team and the environmental team) are responsible for the materials, they will draft and submit them to OES for review according to the dates established in Step 1 and recorded on the Worksheet, typically 6 to 8 weeks prior to the public involvement. OPD or the head of the office responsible for the project's delivery will then review the layout and factsheet, and then the OES Office Head provides final approval to proceed.

Once received from the consultant, the GDOT Environmental Analyst will be responsible for submitting the materials to the project team for review, and the GDOT PM will be responsible for submitting the materials to the responsible project delivery office.

- > The project delivery office and OES will have ten days to complete the First Review of the public involvement materials.
- > Revisions should be made to all public involvement materials as needed within five days of comments being received.
- > The delivery office and OES should complete the second review and approval of the materials within five days.

Once approved, the GDOT Environmental Analyst will provide the materials to the NEPA Public Involvement Coordinator for inclusion on the GDOT website.

Step 3 – Coordination with District Planning and Programming Liaison (conducted 6 to 8 weeks prior to public involvement)

For an in-person open house, the DPPL reviews the Public Meeting request information and arranges location, schedules the open house, and arranges advertising and any other needs. GDOT Environmental Analyst sends this to NEPA Public Involvement Coordinator who in turn coordinates with the GDOT Digital Services Manager for posting to the calendar/page. The advertisement should be published once the public involvement website is online and approximately seven to 15 days prior to the meeting start date, and the advertisement should run two times, with confirmation provided by the DPPL. If the open house is a PHOH, the advertisement should be published 30 days before the in-person meeting is held.

Step 4 – Title VI (reviewed 6 to 8 weeks prior to public involvement)

The Consultant Environmental Analyst should consider the Title VI requirements of the public involvement. Some important considerations include:

- > Are there minority (i.e., race, color, national origin) populations in the project area?
- > Is the meeting accessible?
- > Do materials need to be translated to another language?
- > Does there need to be a specialized approach to advertising the public involvement?
- > Does the meeting avoid major religious holidays (of the citizens along the corridor), election days, or any other day causing a hardship to attend?
- > Are there projects in the area that are currently under construction?

These issues may be discussed as part of the Kick-off meeting and the worksheet must be used to include plans to address these issues. For example, the Environmental Analyst may include dates for translating the materials in the schedule of the public involvement materials development and review.

Step 5 – Confirm Dates/Times for the Public Involvement and Advertisement Due Dates (confirmed 6 to 8 weeks prior to public involvement)

The Environmental Analyst should coordinate with the DPPL to ensure that the open house location, date, and time is confirmed. Additionally, the DPPL can confirm the due dates for submitting the advertisements for legal notice of the public involvement. The Environmental Analyst should provide the ad at least three days before the due date provided by the DPPL. Also, the project team should confirm with the DPPL any additional open house needs such as a court reporter, an interpreter, security, and where the location displays will be available following the open house (typically the nearest GDOT Area office).

Step 6 – Meeting Advertisements, Website, and Postcards (confirmed about 5 to 7 weeks prior to public involvement)

The Environmental Analyst provides the DPPL with the advertisements to be included as legal notices. Pursuant to state law, publishing a notice of such hearing for a period of not less than five days in a newspaper of general circulation is required with the first legal notice ads required no less than 30 days prior to the public involvement. No public involvement or hearing shall be held prior to five days after the last day of such period publication.

The GDOT Environmental Analyst will send the final draft materials to the GDOT Digital Services Manager for placement on the public outreach website. The website is typically online at least 30 days before the advertised close of comment period. Postcards should be mailed once the public outreach website is online and approximately seven to 15 days prior to public involvement.

Step 7 – Schedule the Dry Run (scheduled about 3 weeks prior to public involvement)

For all open houses, the Environmental Analyst schedules the Dry Run meeting in coordination with the PM and design team. The Environmental Analyst should invite all GDOT and consultant personnel participating in the open house. The PM and the DPPL can help ensure that all the necessary participants are invited.

Step 8 – Hold the Dry Run (held about 2 weeks prior to public involvement)

For all open houses, the Environmental Analyst will facilitate a Dry Run meeting to allow the project team to talk through potential needs and issues for the open house. The Dry Run is typically held at least two weeks prior to the open house. All staff needed in attendance at an in-person meeting, including SMEs with specific resources, will be determined. The Environmental Analyst will use the Public Involvement Worksheet to conduct the Dry Run.

Step 9 – Website/Postcard Requirements (confirmed about 2 weeks prior to public involvement)

The Environmental Analyst should confirm that the project information is available on the website. The project information should be available on the website at the time the postcards are placed in the mail.

Step 10 – Response to Public Comments (after public involvement, typically 2 to 3 weeks after the close of the comment period)

Environmental Analyst coordinates responses to comments with the project team and drafts response letters to be reviewed by OES and OPD. Once the response letters are approved, the Environmental Analyst sends the letter and the list of recipients to the NEPA Public Involvement Coordinator for routing and posting to the website. A copy of the approved response letter, the distribution list, and the routing email should be placed in ProjectWise.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT MATERIALS AND RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

The table below provides details on the public involvement materials needed for typical public involvement. It also identifies the team member usually responsible for preparing these materials. If the project involves a consultant team, the Environmental Analyst usually refers to the consultant Environmental Analyst, but the material needs to be reviewed by the GDOT Environmental Analyst and the project team. The Public Involvement Kickoff is the best time to clearly identify the party (or individual) responsible for these materials. It is also a good time to identify when these materials are needed to ensure adequate times for review and to ensure that important deadlines are met.

Table 2 – Public Involvement Materials and Responsibilities

Deliverable	Brief Description	Responsible Party
Worksheet	Step-by-step document to be filled out at each PI milestone and to be used as a reference for PI project meetings and planning.	Environmental Analyst and PM
Welcome Letter Handout/Web Information	Public facing description of the proposed project, including existing conditions, need, benefits, maps, project phase, and an explanation of the need for public involvement. A comment card is included in this deliverable. For all meetings, this information is seen on the project website homepage.	Environmental Analyst, PM, Designer
Advertisement	Legal ad including meeting time and location for in-person Open Houses and go-live dates of the website. This deliverable is to be sent to DPPL for distribution in legal organ(s).	Environmental Analyst, DPPL
Fact Sheet	One page memo used internally by project team at public involvement meeting. Lists basic project facts.	Design
Layouts	Depiction of the proposed project including all changes, environmental resources, ROW takes, and typical sections.	Design
Introductory Boards	PowerPoint slides using succinct bullets, graphics, and icons to explain the project description, need, benefits, specific features such as RCUTs and roundabouts. For in-person Open Houses, these slides should be printed as display boards.	Environmental Analyst
Detour Maps	Map showing the proposed location, length, and duration of off-site detours during project construction.	Design
Web Page	Work with NEPA Public Involvement Coordinator to set up. They will require the handout, maps, introductory boards, and layouts; as well as the go-live date and the comment close date. Website URL/QR code to be included on postcards and advertisement. Will be “live” and able to collect comments for a minimum of 30 days	Environmental Analyst, GDOT Digital Services Manager

Deliverable	Brief Description	Responsible Party
	before the end of the comment period.	
Postcards	Includes brief project description, meeting information, project team contact information, and website URL/QR code. Postcards should be sent to addresses within 0.5 mile on either side of the project corridor. Using Every Door Direct Mail (EDDM), select the postal routes within that radius as recipients. To be mailed out the day the website goes live.	Environmental Analyst
Name Tags (optional)	Color coded for each SME, use for in-person Open House only.	Environmental Analyst

AFTER PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The time immediately after the public involvement is critical for the project team. The Environmental Analyst needs to strategize with all team members about the most accurate and expedient way to offer meaningful responses to the public.

Open House Synopsis (by 10:00 AM the day after the in-person Open House)

Using the template found on the OES SharePoint site, the Environmental Analyst will complete an open house synopsis by 10:00 AM the following day. The synopsis is a brief summary of participation and responses gathered at the open house. If a consultant Environmental Analyst is the preparer, they will send the synopsis to the GDOT Environmental Analyst for review, distribution, and archiving in ProjectWise. The synopsis will go to the project team as well as GDOT upper management, with the purpose of ensuring that GDOT leadership is aware of any recent open houses and any related controversy.

Open House Debrief Meeting (the week following the Open House)

The debrief is a project team meeting organized by the Environmental Analyst in the week following the open house. It should be planned and scheduled before the open house. Its purpose is to discuss the results of the open house and next steps related to developing the response letter, including identifying project team members best able to respond to particular comments from the public. Some things to consider during the meeting:

- > Was the project controversial?
- > Were there a large number of public comments? Were they detailed in nature?
- > Will the comments from the public lead to substantial project changes?
- > Will the comments from the public lead to project commitments that need to be detailed on the Environmental Commitments Table (ECT)?

Summary of Comments (drafted during the comment period as comments are submitted)

Using the template found on the OES SharePoint site, the Environmental Analyst will organize and summarize the comments received during the open house and during the public comment period. The summary is used as a roadmap to develop a response to comments. The Environmental Analyst shares it with the project team and identifies who on the team would be best to respond to particular comments.

Response Letter (distributed to commenters 30 to 45 days after the comment period ends)

For all public involvement where comments are collected, the project team must send out a response letter to all commenters. Additionally, the letter will be made available on the project website. Comments may be collected in the following ways:

- > Written on handout comment card and put into comment box at in-person Open House;
- > Given verbally to court reporter at in-person Open House;
- > Submitted electronically on project website;
- > Relayed to Project Manager/Project Team member via email or phone call; or
- > Written on a handout comment card and mailed to OES.

The response letters are developed by the Environmental Analyst with input from other disciplines as necessary (ex: Design, ROW, PM). Consultant-prepared letters are to be submitted to GDOT and reviewed by OES. All letters must also be reviewed by the delivery office. GDOT's goal is to mail, email, or post response letters to the public within 45 days of the close of the comment period.

Environmental Commitments (added after the responses sent, if needed)

Comments and formal feedback received through public involvement may result in a commitment to be included on the ECT and/or the Environmental Resources Impact Table (ERIT). The Environmental Analyst should be sure to include these commitments as appropriate, if the project team determines they are feasible.

Public Involvement Documentation (after the responses sent)

If the public involvement was for a federal-aid project, the results must be summarized in the environmental document and public involvement materials must be included in the project file. If the environmental document is a Categorical Exclusion (CE), EA, or EIS, the following must be included in the attachments or appendices of the document:

- > Public Involvement Handout/Information Boards;

- > Comments;
- > Summary of Comments; and
- > Response letter(s).

PUBLIC HEARING OPEN HOUSE

After FHWA's approval of the Draft EA or EIS, a public hearing phase is required prior to submitting the Final EA/FONSI or Final EIS. Generally, this is conducted through a PHOH or an advertisement allowing the public to request a PHOH. If a PHOH is not requested, it may be waived with FHWA approval. The intent of the PHOH is to gather feedback from the public on the draft EA/FONSI or EIS and to inform them of the next steps in the project: environmental approval and certification. A PHOH is planned for and organized in a similar fashion to the PIOH, with the addition of a required virtual live event.

Much of the documentation to advertise, support, and summarize the PHOH comments and responses follows the public involvement process. The PHOH documentation will be included in the attachments to the final environmental document. A brief list of some of this documentation includes:

- > Advertisement in the local legal organ and tear sheets/affidavit of the ad run dates.
- > Copies of the postcard mailed to residents and businesses within zip codes and postal routes near the project area providing notification of the public hearing, including documentation on the areas where the postcards were mailed.
- > Examples of the sign content and location advertising for the public hearing.
- > Documentation of any other means or methods used to advertise the public hearing.
- > Project layouts depicting the preferred alternative and environmental resources.
- > Project information (traditionally referred to as the "handout package") used to provide the public with project background and context to aid with the project comments: Need and Purpose statement, project description, summary of environmental findings, and right-of-way acquisition process.
- > A comment card. Although the current process utilizes a web-based platform to review information and provide comments, some of the public may prefer to submit written comments. Also, if an in-person meeting is requested, comment cards will need to be available.
- > Response letter(s) that include comments received during the public hearing process and responses to those comments. The letter is prepared by the Environmental Analyst, and is reviewed by sponsors, design engineers, and departments within GDOT before being signed by the GDOT State Environmental

Administrator. Additional responses may be provided to comments addressed outside of the response letter.

OTHER TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT

Depending on the project's needs, other types of public engagement may be required. This need may be identified through the project-specific PIP or through the course of the project's development. Additional outreach types may include:

- > **Stakeholder Meetings** – During the project concept planning phase, stakeholders may be identified. Throughout the lifecycle of the project, they may require engagement through stakeholder meetings. These meetings take place outside of the PIOH and PHOH and can include stakeholders such as neighborhood associations, CACs, business leaders, religious organizations, school boards, environmental advocacy groups, etc. Stakeholder meetings can vary in format and agenda based on the needs and interests of each group but should serve to solicit feedback from stakeholders about the communities they represent and share project updates and milestones. All meetings should be documented in the PIP.
- > **Targeted Outreach** – For all types of public involvement, from PIOH and PHOH meetings to stakeholder meetings, targeted outreach is necessary to inform communities of the project and provide the opportunity to engage. Typical advertising means such as postcard mailers and advertisements in local papers can be enhanced with targeted outreach such as yard signs, social media advertisement posts, flyers and doorhangers, etc. Targeted outreach should focus on the specific needs of the community; English proficiency, access to the internet, involvement in neighborhood groups and associations; advertisements and outreach should be tailored to each location.
- > **Surveys** – There are two typical instances where a survey is employed by the project team to solicit feedback from the public. The first is when there will be an offsite detour during project construction; a survey is sent by the PM to stakeholders in the project area such as EMS and school bus providers. The second typically happens during final design; when a neighborhood is designated eligible for a noise abatement wall. The residents adjacent to the proposed wall will be given a survey to determine if they vote to construct a noise abatement wall or not. Surveys may be utilized for various types of public outreach, always with the goal of receiving public opinion on the proposed project.

Guidebook Revision History

Revision Description	Relevant Sections	Revision Date
Initial Publication	All	2/24/2026