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the video

Environment

NEPA Regulatory Framework and Process

Virtual Public Involvement

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Virtual Public Involvement helps transportation agencies meet people where they are: online!



Our VPI Initiative is part of the [Every Day Counts](#) Program, a program dedicated to helping state DOTs, MPOs, and local public agencies advance practice-ready and proven innovations to communicate effectively with the public.

In this short video we will discuss:

- What is Virtual Public Involvement (VPI).
- Benefits and Challenges of VPI.
- VPI Opportunities, Tools and Technologies.

What is Virtual Public Involvement (VPI)?

Virtual Public Involvement is the use of digital technology and innovative strategies to engage the public in the transportation decision-making process, helping to inform and solicit input from the public during planning, project development and environmental review, or any other stage in the process.

VPI techniques can help agencies provide a balanced public involvement approach by complementing traditional public involvement techniques.

VPI tools are not meant to replace the need for in-person meetings, nor change existing public involvement requirements established by statute, regulation, or executive order.

If only traditional, in-person, public involvement approaches are used, it can limit the success of the engagement process, due to:

- Low or inconsistent in-person participation
- Lack of diverse viewpoints among participants.
- Language and cultural barriers.
- Conflicting schedules (i.e., work, family, and social commitments).
- Expensive and time-consuming for agencies.
- Changing expectations of 21st Century population.

Your agency can use VPI techniques to address these challenges.



Image Credit: FHWA

What are the benefits and challenges associated with VPI?

VPI provides agencies with a virtual platform to engage the public and receive feedback, leveraging the remote dissemination of information to the public and creating efficiencies in how public input is collected and considered. This approach effectively supplements the traditional face-to-face public involvement process with innovative technologies and techniques for collecting and sharing information.

A majority of the State DOTs, MPOs and local agencies incorporating VPI tools and techniques have experienced benefits and have made VPI part of their ongoing public engagement approach. Many agencies experience a notable increase in participation when using VPI, and a lower cost per participant. As part of a robust public engagement process, VPI tools can help identify issues early in the project planning process, reducing the need to revisit decisions.

In addition, virtual tools can expand your agency's outreach efforts to capture and include stakeholders who typically do not participate in face-to-face public meetings. This greater engagement can improve project quality. For some people, VPI is more convenient because they can participate when and where they choose, without traveling to a specific place at a specific time.



Image Credit: FHWA

Although agencies have experienced significant VPI benefits, there are potential challenges that should be considered, which may limit participation. There is no one style or procedural solution that fits all situations. Some stakeholders still prefer in-person engagement. Additionally, while broadband access has significantly expanded over recent years, access may still be limited in rural and underserved communities, meaning that relying only on digital engagement may leave people out. Even with the best of planning and with accessibility accounted for, some community members will not be reached with VPI strategies alone.

VPI is always best when paired with in-person engagement opportunities.

VPI Opportunities, Tools and Technologies

VPI provides new opportunities, tools and techniques for public involvement, like:

- **All-in-One Tools.** These are platforms that combine crowdsourcing features, mapping, visualization, file storage and sharing, and survey instruments that provide agency staff with a mechanism to dramatically increase public participation in a convenient and streamlined package.
- **Crowdsourcing Tools** are the use of digital tools (both online and mobile) to assemble ideas, comments, or suggestions, and to provide a forum for others to assess the value of those suggestions by voting for or against them.
- **Digital Tools to Enhance In-Person Events** provide a unique experience that is more engaging, fulfilling, and fun. These tools give agencies the capability to gather more structured feedback and give citizens opportunities to lead their own meetings in their communities at times and places that work for them.
- **Do-It-Yourself Videos** are accessible content about a project that is shared with stakeholders. Videos about plans, projects, events, and more can be posted to streaming sites, shared on social media, and made accessible on project websites, reaching potentially new audiences through a popular medium.



Image Credit: FHWA

- **Mapping Tools** are a powerful way to communicate information using a map in a visual format and collect feedback and preferences from the public.
- **Mobile Applications** reach more people than traditional media, especially in communities with high rates of smartphone use. Mobile Applications can leverage geolocation services, which associate users' feedback with specific project locations and allow users to submit geotagged photos or share location-based input.

- **Project Visualizations** help communicate complex project information in a way that's more universally understood in order to enhance public understanding of a project's goals. This is accomplished through the use of photo simulations, 3-D images, videos, aerial footage, augmented reality or virtual reality.

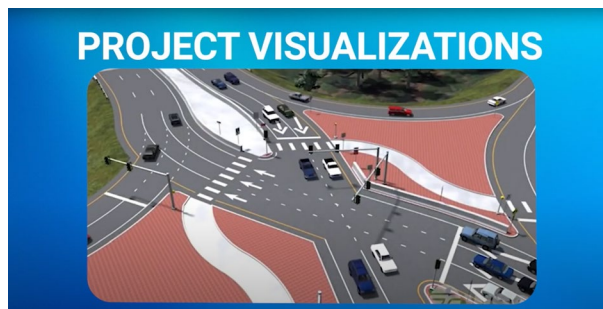


Image Credit: FHWA

- **Social Media** helps inform the public about agency plans and projects; however, it can also assist in engaging with users and developing a robust social media following as part of a public relations approach. Maintaining a community of engaged followers can improve public outreach effectiveness when an agency seeks feedback.

- **Targeted Online Ads** have become a popular way for agencies to promote public involvement in transportation projects and plans, through targeting specific demographic groups or geographic locations (“geo-targeting”), to strategically expand awareness and bring new participants into a process. Often promoting a survey, website, or social media account ads are an economical way to encourage engagement in transportation planning and project development.

- **Virtual Town Halls** or virtual public meetings offer stakeholders a way to take part in the planning process in the convenience of home without traveling to a meeting location.



Image Credit: FHWA

As we discussed, VPI is a useful suite of digital technologies and innovative strategies that compliments the traditional public involvement process. It benefits transportation agencies by expanding the reach of public involvement activities, often resulting in greater participation, at a lower cost per participant.

Many members of the public prefer using VPI because of its convenience. However, VPI is not a one-size-fits-all tool, and it should be paired with in-person engagement opportunities.

You can find more useful information including dozens of resources, case studies and examples of VPI in practice, on the [FHWA VPI website](#), all to help you use technology to enhance community engagement, making it more accessible and inclusive.



Image Credit: FHWA

Web Resources

- FHWA's Virtual Public Involvement Toolkit and Resources
https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement/vpi/
- U.S DOT's *Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision-Making*
<https://www.transportation.gov/priorities/equity/promising-practices-meaningful-public-involvement-transportation-decision-making>
- Overview of FHWA's public involvement requirements
https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement/
- Overview of Public Involvement Requirements in NEPA Transportation Decision-making
https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/nepa/trans_decisionmaking.aspx

The content of this document is not a substitute for information obtained from State departments of transportation, appropriate FHWA Division Offices, and applicable laws. Scenarios have been simplified for emphasis and do not necessarily reflect the actual range of requirements applicable to the scenario or this topic. This document was created by the Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, and is offered to the public to heighten and focus awareness of Federal-aid requirements within the local public agencies community and reinforces the importance of these necessary policies, procedures, and practices.

This companion resource is the script content for the video production of the same name.