Determining Engagement

Requested by

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November 14, 2025

The Caltrans Division of Research, Innovation and System Information (DRISI) receives and evaluates numerous research problem statements for funding every year. DRISI conducts Preliminary Investigations on these problem statements to better scope and prioritize the proposed research in light of existing credible work on the topics nationally and internationally. Online and print sources for Preliminary Investigations include the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) and other Transportation Research Board (TRB) programs, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the research and practices of other transportation agencies, and related academic and industry research. The views and conclusions in cited works, while generally peer reviewed or published by authoritative sources, may not be accepted without qualification by all experts in the field. The contents of this document reflect the views of the authors, who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein. The contents do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the California Department of Transportation, the State of California, or the Federal Highway Administration. This document does not constitute a standard, specification, or regulation. No part of this publication should be construed as an endorsement for a commercial product, manufacturer, contractor, or consultant. Any trade names or photos of commercial products appearing in this publication are for clarity only.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AASHTO   American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials

CAC   citizen advisory committee

Caltrans   California Department of Transportation

CAMP   Conflict Assessment and Management Process

CAP   Community Awareness Plan

CE   categorical exclusion

CEQA   California Environmental Quality Act

CID   community improvement district

DOT   department of transportation

EA   environmental assessment

EAU   Environmental Analysis Unit

ECOS   Environmental Compliance Oversight System

EIS   environmental impact study

EJ   environmental justice

EMS   emergency medical services

FDOT   Florida Department of Transportation

IAP2   International Association for Public Participation

ITD   Idaho Transportation Department

LEP   limited English proficiency

MnDOT   Minnesota Department of Transportation

MPO   metropolitan planning organization

NACTO   National Association of City Transportation Officials

NCDOT   North Carolina Department of Transportation

NEPA   National Environmental Policy Act

PDN   Project Delivery Network

PDP   Plan Development Process

PEL   Planning and Environmental Linkages

PennDOT   Pennsylvania Department of Transportation

PI   public involvement/public information

PIC   Public Involvement Coordinator/Public Involvement Consultant

PICSViz   public involvement, community studies and visualization

PIOH   public information open house

PIP   Public Involvement Plan

POP   Public Outreach Planner/Project Outreach Planner

PPP   Public Participation Plan

PS&E   plans, specifications and estimates

PTA	Parent Teacher Association
RFP	request for proposal
SEPA	State Environmental Policy Act
STIP	State Transportation Improvement Plan
TPP	Transportation Planning and Programming
TxDOT	Texas Department of Transportation
UDOT	Utah Department of Transportation

Executive Summary

Background

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is developing a suite of resources to aid staff members conducting public engagement with the department's partners, tribes, stakeholders and general community. The October 2024 draft publication, *Community Engagement Guidance for Plans and Projects: A Statewide Playbook*, and the accompanying draft *District Community Engagement Playbook Template*, provide guidance for conducting this engagement.

With this Preliminary Investigation, Caltrans sought information to supplement current community engagement guidance, including criteria to determine when and to what degree Caltrans will engage with the community, outside of state and federal mandates. This project examined the following topic areas:

- Project characteristics and impacts that may suggest the need for community engagement.
- Public engagement criteria matrices, flowcharts, process visualizations and methods.
- Strategies to prioritize early public engagement efforts given limited resources.
- Experiences of other state departments of transportation (DOTs) and selected local agencies in establishing community engagement practices beyond statutory requirements.

CTC & Associates gathered literature and reporting from state transportation agencies about establishing community engagement practices beyond statutory requirements, including the extent of and examples for the five levels of engagement established by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation. Findings from a review of in-progress and completed domestic research supplemented survey results.

Summary of Findings

Survey of Practice

An online survey distributed to member states of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Committee on Transportation Communications and other potential respondent groups sought information about community engagement practices. Multiple attempts to engage with different respondent groups produced responses from three state DOTs:

- Idaho Transportation Department (ITD).
- North Carolina DOT (NCDOT).
- Texas DOT (TxDOT).

Survey findings, supplemented by a review of relevant resources, are presented in a case study format. Topic areas addressed in each case study vary based on available information. Supplementing the three case studies informed by survey responses are case studies for two state DOTs — Minnesota and Utah — that were developed using only publicly available resources.

Below are selected excerpts from these case studies. Significantly more detail about each agency's practices can be found in the **Detailed Findings** section of this report.

Idaho Transportation Department

ITD involves the community in programming, planning and developing projects related to the state's highway system to make informed decisions and meet its legal obligations.

To assist in determining the timing and level of engagement for projects, ITD has developed the [Public Outreach Planner](#) (POP), a seven-step online tool for "analyzing, quantifying and tracking public outreach needs." POP streamlines the outreach decision-making process, allowing project managers and project teams to assist ITD Office of Communications staff, public involvement coordinators and region planners determine the outreach level; estimate budgets, staffing and other resource needs; and track public involvement throughout a project's life cycle.

The tool offers individual tracks for transportation impacts and projects in five categories: corridor plan, environmental and design, construction, nonconstruction roadway impacts and emergency/disaster. Worksheets are available for each of the five categories that use drop-down menus for selecting responses. When complete, each online worksheet generates a POP score and POP level. To obtain a public involvement guide that is specific to a POP level, users are advised to "complete with definitions of tools and techniques appropriate for your effort" and then move to the [POP Level Reference Guide](#) web page.

In the [*ITD Guide to Public Involvement for Programs, Planning and Projects*](#), the agency describes its philosophy for public involvement in three words: integrated, early and often.

Community engagement efforts are funded individually at the project level. Consultants are used to conduct community engagement, primarily for their expertise (such as video and graphic production) or to address inadequate staffing issues (for example, the tasks may not be technical or difficult but require more time than is available to ITD staff). In this capacity, consultants serve as "behind the scenes" organizers while agency staff members remain the face of the project and lead the effort.

Using consultants is not without challenges, however. Cost is one factor. Employing consultants is much more expensive than performing tasks in-house, which makes it essential to obtain project team buy-in to even begin engagement activities. Time is another factor. It may take months to hire the right experts. Also, with so many consultants working in so many districts, it's difficult to achieve consistency in quality and style across products.

To establish guidelines for the timing and level of community engagement, ITD recommends:
- Promoting early and frequent involvement with the public.
- Integrating involvement activities into a department's processes, and understanding National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and civil rights laws.
- Providing constant education of and interaction with project teams.

Minnesota Department of Transportation

Minnesota DOT (MnDOT) is one of two agencies not responding to the project survey that are highlighted in this report's case studies. This examination summarizes key elements of MnDOT's public engagement practices drawing solely from the agency's published guidance.

The 2021 [*Public Engagement Planning Handbook*](#) sets the stage for MnDOT's community outreach related to transportation projects. The agency describes its public engagement planning process as

"provid[ing] a framework for initial public engagement activity." The handbook notes these key points regarding the timing of community engagement:

- Public engagement can and often does occur outside of a project life cycle on topics such as noise walls, traffic signal timing, speed limits, snowplowing, congestion management and pedestrian safety — just to name a few.

- Public engagement specific to projects is needed through all phases of project development, from the early planning and scoping stages to construction, operations and maintenance.

Excerpts from the handbook's guidance also address the scale of public engagement:

- Early public engagement provides insight about potential controversy.

- Public engagement efforts should be scaled to match the magnitude or complexity of the project, including the potential challenges of a project, such as right of way acquisition, relocation or the historical context of MnDOT's relationship with the community.

- The act of *planning* for engagement (for example, completing a stakeholder analysis or assessment regarding public expectations and impact) will help one determine the *level* of recommended engagement appropriate for a project, program or mode.

- There is no "silver-bullet" approach or level of engagement prescribed or predetermined for any particular type of project, program or mode. Developing appropriate engagement strategies for different audiences is recommended.

- Engagement is scalable to the type of project, and project staff is responsible for managing the public's expectations during lower- and higher-impact projects.

MnDOT's *Public Engagement Guidance* notes that "MnDOT frequently contracts with consultant firms to conduct public engagement activities in large projects and planning studies," and highlights the importance of "establish[ing] clear expectations for the consultant of their role in engaging with communities in partnership with MnDOT." The guidance also notes that "the community (and the [p]roject) will benefit more if the contractor has existing connections and relationships within the community impacted."

North Carolina Department of Transportation

While the stated purpose of NCDOT's July 2024 *Statewide Public Involvement Plan* (*Statewide PIP*) is to "provide statewide public involvement guidance in accordance with federal and state environmental regulations," the publication also recognizes the larger purpose of public involvement. For example, the plan states that public engagement is needed when:

- It is required by law.
- Public decisions have substantive impacts on communities and individuals.
- The public has information, ideas and/or concerns that should be considered by decision-makers who are serving as public representatives and have the responsibility to listen to their constituents and others before acting on their behalf.

NCDOT conducts "some form of public involvement for nearly all projects — ranging from a simple postcard or newsletter (often combined with a PublicInput.com site) to multifaceted public outreach campaigns." (PublicInput offers a community engagement platform for use by state and local governments "to connect with residents, simplify engagement, and make data-driven decisions.")

There is no "one size fits all" for the level of public involvement. Rather the level is determined by the project's scope, potential impacts, demographics and the surrounding context. *Statewide PIP* recognizes that the level of public involvement depends on many project factors, such as:

- Type, size and duration of the project.
- Complexity of the project and project site.
- Significance of direct, indirect, cumulative and disproportionate impacts.
- Number of partners and sources of potential funding.

NCDOT is currently conducting its annual update of the *Statewide PIP*. The agency is also developing a new public involvement decision matrix, which is expected to be completed by the end of 2025.

Public engagement efforts are typically funded through project budgets. Although the agency has a central public involvement team that guides and oversees all engagement efforts, NCDOT began outsourcing the majority of public involvement project work to consultants 12 to 14 years ago. Consultants:

- Prepare materials based on agency guidance and standards.
- Attend outreach efforts along with DOT staff.
- Compile feedback and summarize engagement efforts.

While using consultants is legislatively mandated, bringing in specialty firms to reach traditionally underserved populations provides an added benefit to the agency in that "the people engaging particular communities look like the community whenever possible."

Other agencies establishing guidelines for the timing and level of community engagement could consider clearly defining standards, guidelines and processes to ensure consistency across public involvement efforts. NCDOT has benefited from having a centralized public involvement team.

Texas Department of Transportation

TxDOT established its public involvement policy in 2011 and continued to make regular updates to it over the years. The most recent update, two years in the making and released in early 2025, employed a multifaceted information-gathering effort to "reflect the changing demographics of Texas." The June 2024 summary of the effort to revamp TxDOT's public engagement guidance noted that "95% of the state change in Texas is attributable to the growth of minority populations."

TxDOT's *[Strategic Public Engagement Guidance: Texas Department of Transportation's Statewide Approach](#)* was developed to offer guidance for going beyond legally required public engagement. From page 10 of the document (page 6 of the PDF):

> TxDOT's existing *Environmental Public Involvement Handbook* should be applied on projects where completing public involvement activities are legally required, such as during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase of project development. This *Strategic Public Engagement Guidance* should be applied to go above and beyond legally required public involvement activities, as indicated in the TxDOT *Environmental Handbook*.

Instead of delaying engagement for specific project phases, TxDOT recommends early outreach that begins as soon as the basics of a project or study can be communicated. Districts are encouraged to develop project pages, conduct meetings and perform other stakeholder outreach along with early online engagement efforts.

Rather than relying on specific project characteristics to trigger and help prioritize public engagement, TxDOT considers that "anything unique" — demographics, project location, potential business impact, even political considerations and elected officials' goals for communities — signals the need for a public involvement planning conversation. The agency's 25 district offices and divisions now follow this new statewide public involvement guidance.

The agency's recently published guidance focuses on four key elements:
- Researching the community.
- Engaging with intention.
- Minimizing barriers to engagement.
- Building community partnerships.

After completing the community research document, planning and executing an entire phase of public engagement can begin. Recognizing that projects of varying scale will require engagement, *Strategic Public Engagement Guidance* is written to allow for flexibility and "designed to help prioritize what is vital for your project and what can be achieved within your means." A chapter describing seven steps to crafting effective engagement is followed by 10 "one-pagers" that offer techniques that can minimize or eliminate barriers such as uneasiness/wariness of government interaction, cultural/personal values, and misunderstanding of process or project. Each one-pager provides additional considerations, common examples of the barrier and links to supplementary guidance.

Utah Department of Transportation

Utah DOT (UDOT) is the second of two agencies not responding to the project survey that are highlighted in this report's case studies. This examination summarizes key elements of UDOT's public engagement practices drawing solely from the agency's published guidance.

UDOT involves the public in its long-range transportation plan and other plans and programs, in accordance with the agency's *Public Participation Plan: FY 2023-2026*. UDOT's Solutions Development process is intended to strengthen the connection between Utah's Transportation Vision and project delivery. Over three planning phases — context, problem and solutions — the Solutions Development process is used to:
- Understand community context, challenges and concerns to form goals and objectives.
- Identify area needs and opportunities, and develop evaluation criteria to ensure solutions meet community goals and objectives.
- Develop and evaluate transportation solutions.

The *Project Outreach Planner* (*POP*) is UDOT's primary tool for determining the timing and level of public involvement needed for transportation projects. As described in the planner's introduction:

> As a Department, UDOT's goal is to reduce overall impacts to the public while meeting transportation needs. As such, planning for and executing appropriate strategies to involve and communicate with the public at large and with individual stakeholders throughout the life cycle of [a] transportation project is critical. From the time a project is considered in concept to the stage when it is constructed and being maintained, the public's needs, concerns and questions must be taken into account and addressed to achieve the goal of reducing impacts.

Two categories of projects have been developed: preconstruction and construction. Fillable worksheets for each project category include multiple-choice questions to identify stakeholder needs, issues and

concerns with respect to a transportation project. The *POP* includes descriptions of each question and the range of considerations that may be implicated by the question. Each question's answer choices are equally weighted in a scoring range of 1 to 5 and then averaged to produce the POP score. The POP score is used to recommend a POP level of 1 to 5, with "[o]ne representing the most minimal public outreach effort and five representing the most robust and extensive level of public outreach."

The project manager can check the POP score against typical project descriptions, identified on pages 9 through 11 of the planner, to refine the determination of the appropriate public engagement level for a given project. Typical projects are described in the *POP* based on criteria that include political interest, project area and duration, project impacts and public interest.

Because projects can change over time in complexity, strategy or tasks, the worksheet should be repeated as many times as necessary to reflect the evolution of a project and the public's interest. The agency recognizes that each public involvement strategy must be custom-designed to support the specific project.

A budget estimating tool helps approximate public engagement budgeting, including contractor or third-party involvement and direct expenses. Finally, the *POP* provides recommendations based on a project's POP level, staffing, tools and techniques for public involvement.

Related Research and Resources

A literature search of publicly available domestic in-progress and published research identified publications that are organized into two categories:

- National guidance.
- State guidance and practices.

Table ES1, which begins on page 12, summarizes these publications by providing the publication or project title, the year of publication if research is completed, the publication category and a brief description of the resource. Significantly more detail about each resource can be found in the **Detailed Findings** section of this report.

Additional publications appear in **Related Resources** at the close of each case study in the **Survey of Practice** portion of this report.

Gaps in Findings

Some survey respondents provided more detail than others, and overall, the response to the survey was quite limited, with respondents from only three agencies describing to varying degrees their practices for determining the timing and level of public engagement. Case studies of two additional transportation agencies were developed based on published guidance. To supplement the publications cited in each of the five case studies, the literature search uncovered minimal guidance about how agencies structure public engagement practices beyond the engagement required under federal regulations.

Next Steps

Moving forward, Caltrans could consider:

- Consulting with ITD about its POP tool for more details about the transportation project tracks and about specific projects where the tool has been used.

- Following up with ITD for the status of the updated *ITD Guide to Public Involvement for Programs, Planning and Projects* and for results of the federal review.

- Reaching out to MnDOT's public engagement contacts to learn about the successes and challenges associated with application of the agency's *Public Engagement Planning Handbook.*

- Consulting with NCDOT regarding the annual update of the *Statewide Public Involvement Plan* and new public involvement decision matrix expected to be complete by the end of 2025.

- Contacting TxDOT to address the benefits of moving beyond the IAP2 Spectrum of Participation to focus on the agency's four key elements of engagement.

- Reaching out to UDOT to discuss implementation of the *POP* and its worksheets, budget estimator and other supporting materials.

Table ES1. Related Research and Resources

Publication or Resource (Year)	Publication Category	Excerpt from Abstract or Description of Resource
Research in Progress: NCHRP Project 08-161, Cultivating Accountability Through Meaningful Public Engagement (expected completion date: May 2026)	National Guidance	Will develop a manual with practical strategies, processes, methods and procedures for understanding and establishing meaningful public engagement in transportation decision-making with an emphasis on the engagement of vulnerable communities.
Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision-Making (2022)	National Guidance	Contains promising practices around meaningful public involvement and participation that can help U.S. DOT funding recipients comply with federal regulatory and other existing requirements.
AASHTO Public Involvement Peer Exchange: Summary Report (2021)	National Guidance	Provides examples of the public involvement practices and lessons learned for four state DOTs: Minnesota, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Utah.
NCHRP Research Report 905: Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Involvement in Transportation Planning and Project Development (2019)	National Guidance	Presents a toolkit for measuring the effectiveness of public involvement activities. The toolkit is designed to collect feedback from the public on several indicators of effectiveness and to compare that feedback with the agency's own perceptions.
Improving Public Engagement (2019)	National Guidance	Provides recommendations that aim to change an agency's approach to public engagement, as well as how it is conducted.
Transportation Academies as Catalysts for Civic Engagement in Transportation Decision-Making, (2023)	State Guidance and Practices: Multiple States	Tracks the rise of transportation academies in North America, and provides a detailed look at two academies: one in Portland, Oregon, with a 30-year history, and another recently launched in the Salt Lake City, Utah, region.
Emerging Practices in Community Engagement for Transportation Planning (June 2025)	State Guidance and Practices: Florida	Documents traditional and innovative methods for public notification and engagement and state-level and national trends. Complements FDOT's 2022 *Public Engagement Resource Guide* by identifying, documenting and synthesizing notable and emerging practices.
Public Engagement Resource Guide (2022)	State Guidance and Practices: Florida	Among the resources under consideration for revision in the project in process described above.
Public Involvement Handbook (2023)	State Guidance and Practices: Florida	Describes levels of public involvement during the six phases of project development: planning; project development and environment; design; construction; alternative project delivery; and operations and maintenance.
Community Awareness Plan Template (undated)	State Guidance and Practices: Florida	Provides a template associated with the previous citation.

| Publication or Resource (Year)	Publication Category	Excerpt from Abstract or Description of Resource
Public Involvement Plan for Georgia DOT Projects (2021)	State Guidance and Practices: Georgia	Informs Georgia DOT staff and partners about the policies, expectations and strategies that may be used for proactive and responsive engagement with the public throughout the transportation project delivery process.
Public Participation Plan (2022)	State Guidance and Practices: Hawaii	Outlines how the public can get involved in the Oahu metropolitan planning organization's (MPO's) planning processes and reflects how the MPO is responding to federal requirements for a proactive public involvement process.
Capital Project Procedures: Public Involvement Action Plan (2020)	State Guidance and Practices: New Jersey	Includes a description of the *Level of Public Involvement During New Project Development*, which identifies four phases: concept development, scope development, design and construction. For each phase, the purpose and public outreach activities are provided for basic and major/complex studies.
Equitable Community Engagement Guide 2020-2023 (undated)	State Guidance and Practices: Oregon	Identifies community assets and offers transparency throughout an engagement effort. Agency staff members are directed to "complete as much information as an individual or as a small team before contacting and/or sharing this information with partners, including but not limited to contractors, consultants, interagency partners, stakeholders or anyone [who] is not involved [in] initial research and plannings, etc."

Background

Public engagement is a regular and ongoing component of transportation planning and project management. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is developing a suite of resources to aid staff members conducting public engagement with the department's partners, tribes, stakeholders and general community, including an October 2024 draft publication, *Community Engagement Guidance for Plans and Projects: A Statewide Playbook*, and the accompanying draft *District Community Engagement Playbook Template*.

Caltrans is interested in community engagement options in project planning before or in addition to engagement is required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and/or the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Caltrans is also seeking strategies for prioritizing early public engagement efforts given limited resources. Options will assist Caltrans in determining when and to what degree to engage with the community, outside of state and federal mandates, in projects with different characteristics or impacts.

This Preliminary Investigation gathered literature and reporting from state departments of transportation (DOTs) about establishing community engagement practices beyond statutory requirements, including the extent of and examples for the five levels of engagement established by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation (see Figure 1).
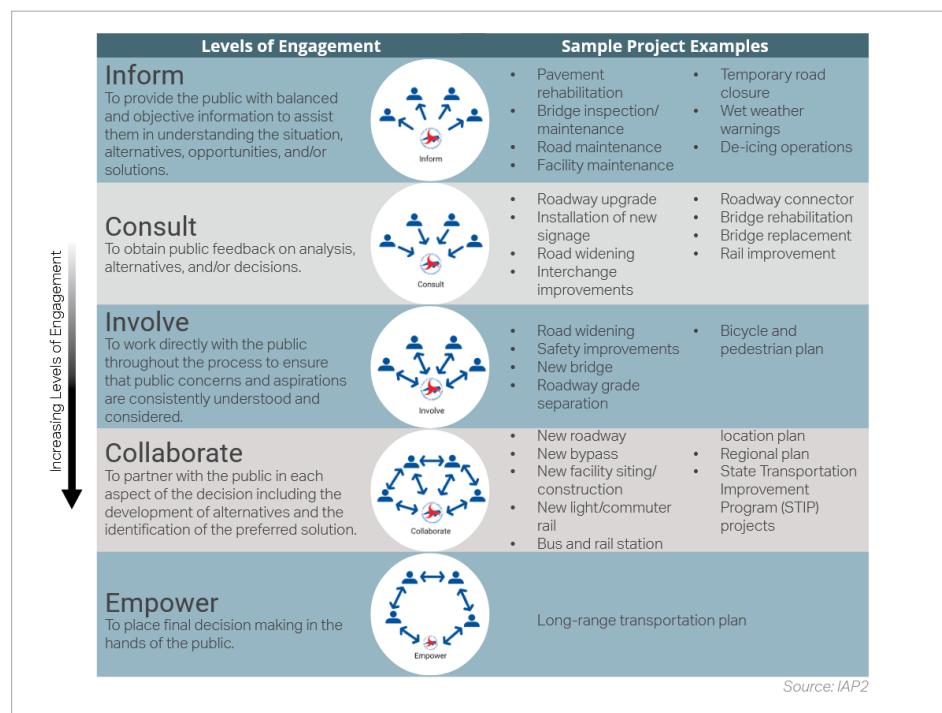
Figure 1. IAP2's Levels of Engagement with Sample Project Examples

(*Source*: IAP2, reproduced in *Public Involvement Practitioner's Guide*.)

Survey of Practice

An online survey sought information about agency experience with community engagement in project planning prior to or otherwise in addition to when engagement is required by law. The survey was distributed to the following groups:

- Member states of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) [Committee on Transportation Communications](#).
- Selected member cities of the [National Association of City Transportation Officials](#) (NACTO).
- Selected transit agencies.

Multiple attempts to solicit feedback from these and other respondent groups produced a limited response, with three state DOTs responding:

- Idaho Transportation Department (ITD)
- North Carolina DOT (NCDOT).
- Texas DOT (TxDOT).

Survey questions are provided in [Appendix A](#).

Survey findings are presented below in a case study format. The topic areas examined in each case study vary given the variability in survey responses and the publicly available references to support those responses. Case studies for the three responding agencies are supplemented by case studies of DOTs in two states — Minnesota and Utah — that are based solely on publicly available resources.

Idaho Transportation Department

Introduction

ITD involves the community in programming, planning and developing projects related to the state's highway system to make informed decisions and meet its legal obligations. Details about the agency's public engagement efforts are summarized below. Citations for publications highlighted in this case study appear in **Related Resources**, beginning on page 20.

Conducting Community Engagement

To determine the demand for community engagement, ITD assesses various characteristics of the proposed project and the needs of its stakeholders. Table 1 presents the characteristics that signal the need to engage the community in ITD's transportation project planning. Other factors not identified in the table are projects that may include noise walls or anticipate comments from special interest groups such as wildlife or bicyclist/pedestrian advocates.

Table 1. Project Characteristics Impacting ITD's Community Engagement Priorities

Project Characteristic	Description
Aesthetics	Projects involving a design that is new to an area or that requests landscaping, painting on bridges or similar activities.
Budget	Project budget, especially those for large projects.

Project Characteristic	Description
Community Interest	Areas where controversial projects have been completed in the past or with a lengthy history of improvements (built or proposed).
Business/Economics	Projects that could affect area businesses (e.g., access consolidation, right of way purchases and/or load limits during or after construction).
Demographics	Proposed activities that will impact low-income minority populations.
Environment	Wetlands projects or projects that have historical value or tribal interest.
Historical Context	Previous projects that have resulted in public distrust or opposition.
Location	Projects in close proximity to areas with large populations and areas of cultural, historical, environmental or recreational interest.
Traffic	Full road closures with or without detours that may last from a few weeks to several months; projects that may impact traffic flow, including roundabouts, access restrictions, nighttime closures on heavily traveled routes that last for more than one year and/or reallocation of existing lanes.

Tribal Interests

ITD has unique considerations for engaging with tribal communities, whose interests in a project are not limited to reservation boundaries. The agency does not have a dedicated office or liaison to coordinate these interests. Instead, each district coordinates independently with the five tribes within the state.

Excluding Community Engagement Activities

In general, project teams work with public information officers to make plans for each project. In some circumstances, ITD chooses not to consider conducting community engagement. For example, maintenance project plans tend to be very limited for projects that don't make significant changes or are classified as categorical exclusions.

Public Outreach Planner

To assist in determining the timing and level of engagement for projects, ITD has developed the Public Outreach Planner (POP), a seven-step online tool for "analyzing, quantifying and tracking public outreach needs." POP streamlines the outreach decision-making process, allowing project managers and project teams to assist ITD Office of Communications staff, public involvement coordinators and region planners determine the outreach level; estimate budgets, staffing and other resource needs; and track public involvement throughout a project's life cycle.

The tool offers individual tracks for transportation impacts and projects in five categories:
- *Corridor plan*, for medium- and long-range highway planning efforts.
- *Environmental and design*, for roadway projects that are in or will be entering the environmental phase.
- *Construction*, for roadway projects that are in or will be entering the construction phase.
- *Nonconstruction roadway impacts*, for projects not associated with the plan, design or construction of an infrastructure improvement project.
- *Emergency/disaster*, for emergency- and disaster-related incidents.

Worksheets are available for each of the five categories that use drop-down menus for selecting responses. When complete, each online worksheet generates a POP score and POP level. To obtain a public involvement guide that is specific to a POP level, users are advised to "complete with definitions of tools and techniques appropriate for your effort" and then move to the POP Level Reference Guide web page (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Screenshot of ITD's POP Level Reference Guide

(*Source*: Idaho Transportation Department.)

The POP online guidance offers a suite of resources that support the five categories of transportation impacts and projects:

- *Typical project descriptions*. Describes common attributes of transportation impacts for each track, at each POP level, allowing the user to refine decisions about the most appropriate POP level for a transportation impact.

- *Budget estimates*. Provides a framework for approximate budgets that contractor or third-party public involvement and communication support may propose, based on the requested level of outreach.

- *Staffing and tools*. Provides a level-by-level snapshot of staffing and suggested possible tools.

- *POP Level Reference Guide*. Offers separate guides for each level that provides comprehensive information on that level's public involvement requirements.

- *POP tracking workbook.* Helps project teams track and document public involvement throughout the life of a project.

Timing the Community Engagement

In the *ITD Guide to Public Involvement for Programs, Planning and Projects*, the agency describes its philosophy for public involvement in three words:

Integrated. Because public involvement is local, ITD suggests that "objectives, activities, the level of support and the timing of public involvement are individualized to address unique characteristics and needs of an affected community. Collaboration among the project manager, team members, public involvement consultants and/or the public involvement coordinator creates the best public involvement results."

Early. Early involvement allows the agency to educate the public and receive public input. Early scoping and planning enable the agency to "develop a public involvement process that will ensure controversy does not stop the project or erode public trust."

Often. Numerous opportunities arise to involve stakeholders in project planning and development, ranging from "one-on-one meetings to attending local city council meetings, and should continue throughout the life of a project."

Determining the Level of Engagement

ITD described its level of community engagement based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, which varies by project. IAP2 defines five levels of engagement: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower. Table 2 provides examples of ITD project types, activities and/or tools that represent four of the five IAP2 levels of engagement.

Table 2. ITD Projects and Activities by Level of Engagement

Level of Engagement	Plans/Products/Projects	Activities/Tools
Level 1: Inform	Nearly all projects, including maintenance	• Website • Press release/news blogs • Social media • Fact sheets
Level 2: Consult	• Large categorical exclusions • Redesign of existing interchanges • Access changes	• Public meetings (open houses) • Online meetings (self-guided) • Surveys
Level 3: Involve	Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) study	Community working groups
Level 4: Collaborate	PELs	• Technical advisory committees • Community working groups • Value planning sessions
Level 5: Empower	Not applicable	Not applicable

Beyond NEPA or state requirements, the attitudes of leaders from districts and headquarters play a strong role in determining how receptive the team is to public feedback, as well as the level of interest from legislators.

Administering Community Engagement

Funding

Community engagement efforts are funded individually at the project level. Gas taxes and commercial vehicle registrations are the primary funding sources for community engagement efforts. Some sales tax is also used. The early engagement funding source is not dependent on the stage of the project.

Consultant Services

Consultants are used to conduct community engagement, primarily for their expertise (such as video and graphic production) or to address inadequate staffing issues (for example, the tasks may not be technical or difficult but require more time than is available to ITD staff). In this capacity, consultants serve as "behind the scenes" organizers while agency staff remains the face of the project and leads the effort.

ITD has been employing consultants for nearly 10 years (at least since 2017). Some districts are more prone than others to use consultants and have been doing it much longer. To begin, the project team develops a scope of work that identifies the consultant's role for the project. Consultants then typically develop the materials used by project staff.

Costs to employ consultants range from $100 to $150 per hour on loaded wage contracts, which reflect their salaries and benefits.

Using consultants for community engagement has been beneficial to ITD in part because the agency has a small team, and it has found that hiring public information officers who have DOT experience is difficult. In addition to providing technical expertise, consultants help staff keep pace with increases in transportation funding that have led to larger projects.

Using consultants is not without challenges, however. Cost is one factor. Employing consultants is much more expensive than performing tasks in-house, which makes it essential to obtain project team buy-in to even begin engagement activities. Time is another factor. It may take months to hire the right experts. Also, with so many consultants working in so many districts, it's difficult to achieve consistency in quality and style across products.

Assessment

Determining the timing and level of community engagement for transportation projects frequently comes with challenges. ITD is a large agency with significant turnover. As a result, its project teams are largely inexperienced and unsure when to include Office of Communications staff in a project's life cycle. The agency also has more projects than staff members who are available to devote time to a project. In addition, the Office of Communications reports to headquarters, so district leadership does not always include Communications staff in district processes.

To establish guidelines for the timing and level of community engagement, ITD recommends:
- Promoting early and frequent involvement with the public.
- Integrating involvement activities into a department's processes, and understanding NEPA and civil rights laws.
- Providing constant education of and interaction with project teams.

Related Resources

Public Outreach Planner, Idaho Transportation Department, 2017.
https://itd.idaho.gov/pop/ITDPOP_2.html
The POP is a seven-step online tool that supports ITD staff in "analyzing, quantifying and tracking public outreach needs." See page 16 for details about this tool.

ITD Guide to Public Involvement for Programs, Planning and Projects, Idaho Transportation Department, undated.
https://itd.idaho.gov/pop/assets/PIguide.pdf

Note: At the time of the survey response, a new guide was under federal review and was expected to be published in the spring of 2025.

This guide "provides general guidelines for anyone who is responsible for involving stakeholders in transportation decision-making." Guidance includes using the POP tool to plan public involvement and creating and implementing a public involvement plan, checklists and examples of completed plans.

Minnesota Department of Transportation

Introduction

Minnesota DOT (MnDOT) is one of two agencies not responding to the project survey that are highlighted in this report's case studies. This examination summarizes key elements of MnDOT's public engagement practices drawing solely from the agency's published guidance.

The 2021 *Public Engagement Planning Handbook* sets the stage for MnDOT's community outreach related to transportation projects. The agency describes its public engagement planning process as "provid[ing] a framework for initial public engagement activity. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to public engagement, MnDOT recognizes that any public engagement effort must address the anticipated effect the plan, project, program or service may have on users and the surrounding community. The public engagement plan is a starting point and we must remain flexible by thoughtfully considering feedback received and addressing the input and issues that may arise."

The five levels of engagement employed by MnDOT mirror those identified in the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. MnDOT's Levels of Engagement
(*Source*: IAP2, from *Public Engagement Planning Handbook*.)

A collection of tools, templates, worksheets and checklists aid MnDOT staff in developing and executing individual public engagement plans. As the agency's 2021 handbook notes, MnDOT's tools are not limited to one level of engagement, and "[m]ost often, tools from previous levels are used in combination with the tools in the level of engagement you're working in."

Citations for publications highlighted in this case study appear in **Related Resources**, beginning on page 26.

Conducting Community Engagement

MnDOT's *Public Engagement Planning Handbook* presents a six-step planning process to conduct community engagement (see Table 3). Each step described in the handbook includes a brief description, considerations and resources to aid staff in completing that step in the process.

Table 3. MnDOT's Six-Step Public Engagement Planning Process

Step	Description	Resource
Step 1: Define Expectations	Clearly define the project and MnDOT's expectations and commitment.	MnDOT Expectations Worksheet Uses a rating scale to assess the priority or impact of a series of questions: • 0 = very low (Inform) • 1 = low to moderate (Consult) • 2 = moderate to high (at least Involve) • 3 = high to very high (Collaborate or consider Empower) Calculating the average score helps to select the best level of engagement for the project. As the handbook notes, "[T]he higher the number, the higher the public engagement level that is likely to be most effective."
Step 2: Identify Issues	Identify stakeholders, issues and needs.	Stakeholder Analysis and Interest vs. Influence Grid Used to identify stakeholders and the issues they care about, and estimate their interest and expected influence over the decisions made regarding that issue. Then, the importance of the issue to the overall project is determined along with how much a stakeholder group will need to be engaged based on answers in the grid. Uses ratings of none, low, moderate, high and unknown.
Step 3: Determine Level of Engagement	Determine the level of engagement and public influence.	MnDOT Public Engagement: Factors Worksheet Addresses factors such as demographics, tribal nations, public relations/politics, planning process/existing studies, historical relationship with MnDOT, traffic impact, urban/rural, business impact, environmental impact, and difficulty of project. Requires rating each factor using a scale of very low, low, moderate, high, very high and not applicable to identify how the level of engagement falls along a continuum of lower to higher. MnDOT Public Engagement: Factors Reference Sheet Used in conjunction with the worksheet. Presents the same factors and provides a See **Determining the Level of Engagement** for additional details of this step in developing a public engagement plan.

Step	Description	Resource
Step 4: Clarify Roles	Clarify public role in decision-making.	Public Expectations Worksheet Uses the same rating scale as the MnDOT Expectations Worksheet but asks questions such as: • How intrusive/disruptive will the public perceive this project to be? • How much do stakeholders care about the issues and the decisions to be made? Calculating the average score helps to select the best level of engagement for the project.
Step 5: Create a Plan	Create and implement public engagement plan.	Advises staff to compile the findings from the worksheets and analysis completed in steps 1-4 to develop a public engagement plan. Public Engagement Plan Template (also appears as Appendix 1 in the *Public Engagement Planning Handbook*)
Step 6: Evaluate	Evaluate engagement efforts (after action review).	MnDOT Post Project Public Engagement Evaluation Reference Guide (also appears as Appendix 2 in the *Public Engagement Planning Handbook*) *From the guide*: Based on feedback from various roles, districts and offices, Market Research created a standardized, statewide post-project survey template that can be administered after a project is completed. **Standardization across MnDOT allows greater experience to be gained with the system** and helps to reduce silos of information within MnDOT. Market Research Public Engagement Question Standards (also appears as Appendix 3 in the *Public Engagement Planning Handbook*) *From the document*: This document outlines the Market Research unit's recommended demographic question standards for public engagement purposes. Programming notes are notated throughout in **bold text** and survey logic is indicated by question wording text in (parentheses).

Engaging with Tribal Communities

Agency considerations for engaging with tribal communities are addressed in the handbook, directing staff to "[r]eview information contained in the MnDOT Public Engagement Policy relative to Tribal Populations" and contact the tribal liaison in the Office of Tribal Affairs. *From page 2 of the policy*:

> Minnesota Statutes §10.65 and Minnesota Executive Order 19-24 — *Affirming the Government to Government Relationship between the State of Minnesota and Minnesota Tribal Nations: Providing for Consultation, Coordination and Cooperation (2019)*: While MnDOT's public engagement responsibilities pertain to relationships with the public and stakeholders, the Office of Tribal Affairs, in accordance with Minn. Stat. §10.65 and Executive Order 19-24, maintains meaningful consultation and coordination with Tribal Nations, on a government-to-government basis. Minn. Stat. §10.65 and Executive Order 19-24 acknowledge the State's unique legal relationship with federally recognized tribes in Minnesota. Public engagement alone does not amount to meaningful consultation with Tribes. The MnDOT Tribal Nations Policy requires that MnDOT consider the principles of the Tribal Nations policy at all phases of planning and project development in the establishment, development, operation, and maintenance of a comprehensive, integrated and connected multimodal transportation system.

Tribal issues are also discussed as part of the *Engaging with Tribal Nations and Tribal Populations* subsection in the February 2021 *Public Engagement Guidance*. This guidance advises staff to seek advice from MnDOT's Office of Tribal Affairs, build cultural awareness and consider Minnesota tribal nations' policy "at all phases of planning and [p]roject development in the establishment, development, operation and maintenance of a comprehensive, integrated and connected multimodal transportation system." The guidance also highlights the requirement for tribal-state relations training for all MnDOT staff likely to work with tribes in Minnesota.

Timing the Community Engagement

MnDOT's *Public Engagement Planning Handbook* notes these key points regarding the timing of community engagement:

- Public engagement can and often does occur outside of a project life cycle on topics such as noise walls, traffic signal timing, speed limits, snowplowing, congestion management and pedestrian safety — just to name a few.

- Public engagement specific to projects is needed through all phases of project development, from the early planning and scoping stages to construction, operations and maintenance.

Tools for Community Engagement

Table 4 excerpts selected content appearing on page 15 of the *Public Engagement Planning Handbook*. This portion of the handbook provides examples of tools used to achieve each level of engagement and examples of when or how these tools might be used.

Table 4. Examples of Tools Used with MnDOT's Five Levels of Engagement

Level of Engagement	Tools to Achieve Level	When or How to Use Tools
Inform: Provide balanced and objective information to help understand the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	• Email updates • Fact sheets • Newsletters • Project website • Public open house • Social media	• Attending a fair, conference or community event • Informing audiences about lane closures, detours or construction schedules • Responding to public inquiries
Consult: Obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	• Field walks and tours • Interviews, focus groups or listening sessions • Online surveys • Small meetings with stakeholders or business owners	• Consulting with businesses to develop potential mitigation measures to lesson construction impacts on businesses • Obtaining feedback on pavement resurfacing or road or bridge realignment projects
Involve: Work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	• Commission or advisory group • Design charrette • Online forum • Planning study • Roadway design activity	• Conducting listening sessions • Engaging one-on-one to develop relationships with community-based organizations • Hosting focus groups for the public and stakeholders

Level of Engagement	Tools to Achieve Level	When or How to Use Tools
Collaborate: *Partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.*	• Citizen or stakeholder advisory committee • Collaborative work group • Empowering community representatives • Participatory budget or decision-making	• Collaborate with industry and agency partners on large oversize/overweight load projects • Collaborate with stakeholders on corridor planning studies
Empower: *Place final decision-making in the hands of the public.*	• City council vote (municipal consent) • Survey balloting or polling • Visual quality committees • Voting committee	• Allowing the public to make decisions on specific project design aspects (light fixtures, landscaping, railings) • Allowing the public to vote on noise walls, snow fence and road diet plans

☞ Practices described in the handbook are examined in greater detail in the February 2021 *Public Engagement Guidance*. Supplemental information addresses a range of topics:

- Engaging with tribal nations and tribal populations.
- Ensuring contracts outline expectations for community engagement when MnDOT contracts with consultant firms to conduct public engagement activities in large projects and planning studies.
- Public engagement cost guidance.
- Public engagement expenses within public engagement plan.
- Process and regulatory considerations.
- Other public engagement frameworks.
- State-tribal terminology.
- Allowable public engagement items.

Determining the Level of Engagement

The *Public Engagement Planning Handbook* notes these key points regarding the scale of public engagement:

- Staff should be cautious about prejudging the level of public engagement needed based on their own perceptions of the project's complexity or previous project experiences. Early public engagement provides insight about potential controversy.

- Public engagement efforts should be scaled to match the magnitude or complexity of the project, including the potential challenges of a project, such as right of way acquisition, relocation or the historical context of MnDOT's relationship with the community.

- The act of *planning* for engagement (for example, completing a stakeholder analysis or assessment regarding public expectations and impact) will help one determine the *level* of recommended engagement appropriate for a project, program or mode.

- There is no "silver-bullet" approach or level of engagement prescribed or predetermined for any particular type of project, program or mode. Developing appropriate engagement strategies for different audiences is recommended.

- Engagement is scalable to the type of project, and project staff is responsible for managing the public's expectations during lower- and higher-impact projects. MnDOT district staff, specialty and modal offices and project teams retain the final decision on determining the level of engagement and corresponding techniques for their specific planning study, project, program, service or ongoing engagement needs.

Administering Community Engagement

Consultant Services

MnDOT's *Public Engagement Guidance* notes that "MnDOT frequently contracts with consultant firms to conduct public engagement activities in large projects and planning studies," and highlights the importance of "establish[ing] clear expectations for the consultant of their role in engaging with communities in partnership with MnDOT." The guidance also notes that "the community (and the [p]roject) will benefit more if the contractor has existing connections and relationships within the community impacted."

Related Resources

Public Engagement at MnDOT, Public Engagement, Minnesota Department of Transportation, 2025.
https://www.dot.state.mn.us/publicengagement/
From the website: Public engagement at MnDOT refers to the agency's commitment to listen first and ultimately inform, consult, involve, collaborate and/or empower stakeholders and the public in transportation decision-making.

> Plans, templates and tools
> Public engagement plans are living documents, meant to be updated as projects progress through the development process and as more information is available. The plans are used to outline the public outreach approach and as a reference for all project team members.

Note: The guidance below is available from the *Plans, templates and tools* web page:

- Project Development-Public Engagement Continuum — guidance on how to engage with the public throughout the project development.
- Strategic Framework for Public Engagement Planning — a step-by-step approach to developing a public engagement plan; PDF includes six considerations to determine scope of engagement.
  - IAP2 Spectrum of Public Engagement — used to select the level of participation that defines the public's role in engagement plans.
- Public Engagement Planning Process — a tool to clarify goals for participation and engagement.
- Business Impact Mitigation Checklist — a tool to identify and address construction impact to area businesses, from planning through scoping and early detail design.
- Community Noise Engagement Flowchart — provides a two-way communications tool between the community and project team.
- Conflict Assessment and Management Process [CAMP] — The five-step CAMP process helps MnDOT personnel strategically plan for and address potential and known conflicts that arise during MnDOT work.

[Training and consultation](#)
The Office of Communications and Public Engagement provides trainings, consultation and guidance in developing, executing and documenting engagement plans and in areas of audience analysis, conflict assessment and cross-cultural communications.

[Information exchange](#)
MnDOT public engagement practitioners and partner agencies share information and resources through meetings, workshops and peer exchanges. The intent is to support public engagement in transportation decision-making and foster statewide quality and consistency in outreach and engagement practices.

Public Engagement Policy, Policy #OE008, Minnesota Department of Transportation, Revised March 10, 2023.
https://edocs-public.dot.state.mn.us/edocs_public/DMResultSet/download?docId=29753459
This policy, initially adopted in September 2016 and updated in this second revision, establishes expectations, provides definitions, outlines responsibilities, and provides resources and related information.

Public Engagement Guidance, Minnesota Department of Transportation, February 17, 2021.
https://edocs-public.dot.state.mn.us/edocs_public/DMResultSet/download?docId=12266081
From the introduction: The audience for this document is all employees — including project managers, planners, engineers, communications and public engagement staff, specialty office staff and others — who want to better understand MnDOT's approach to implementing meaningful public engagement. The guidance may be used as a tool to operationalize MnDOT's public engagement policy and during the onboarding process to orient new employees.

The intent of this document is to offer high-level guidance and direction rather than detailed and prescriptive procedures. The document includes additional resources and tools to reference for more instruction.

Public Engagement Planning Handbook, Minnesota Department of Transportation, 2021.
https://www.dot.state.mn.us/publicengagement/documents/planning-process/PEplanninghandbook.pdf
This handbook "is for anyone involved in a project, study or plan to use to help walk through the steps of public engagement planning. The handbook doesn't cover every topic or issue that may arise, but can help guide the thought process. For more complex questions, the Public Engagement Policy and guidance offers a more in-depth approach.

Worksheets are provided within the document, however each resource is linked to the Word version of the worksheet for electronic use.

The appendices located at the end of the handbook include templates or reference sheets too long to include alongside the information and a list of acronyms."

The handbook includes links to MnDOT's collection of worksheets, tools and references used to plan for and follow up on public engagement:

- [MnDOT Expectations Worksheet](#).
- [Stakeholder Analysis and Interest vs. Influence Grid](#).
- [MnDOT Public Engagement: Factors Worksheet](#).

- [MnDOT Public Engagement: Factors Reference Sheet](#).
- [Public Expectations Worksheet](#).
- [Public Engagement Plan Template](#).
- [MnDOT Post Project Public Engagement Evaluation Reference Guide](#).
- [Market Research Public Engagement Question Standards](#).

North Carolina Department of Transportation

Introduction

NCDOT's public involvement team facilitates a robust community engagement program. The agency's Public Involvement website provides resources for stakeholders and agency staff that inform appropriate engagement with the public impacted by proposed transportation projects.

While the stated purpose of the agency's July 2024 *Statewide Public Involvement Plan* (*Statewide PIP*) is to "provide statewide public involvement guidance in accordance with federal and state environmental regulations," the publication also recognizes the larger purpose of public involvement. For example, the plan states that public engagement is needed when:

- It is required by law.
- Public decisions have substantive impacts on communities and individuals.
- The public has information, ideas and/or concerns that should be considered by decision-makers who are serving as public representatives and have the responsibility to listen to their constituents and others before acting on their behalf.

NCDOT is currently conducting its annual update of the *Statewide PIP* and also developing a new public involvement decision matrix, which is expected to be completed by the end of 2025. The graphic in Figure 4 shows the general engagement requirements based on the class of project action.
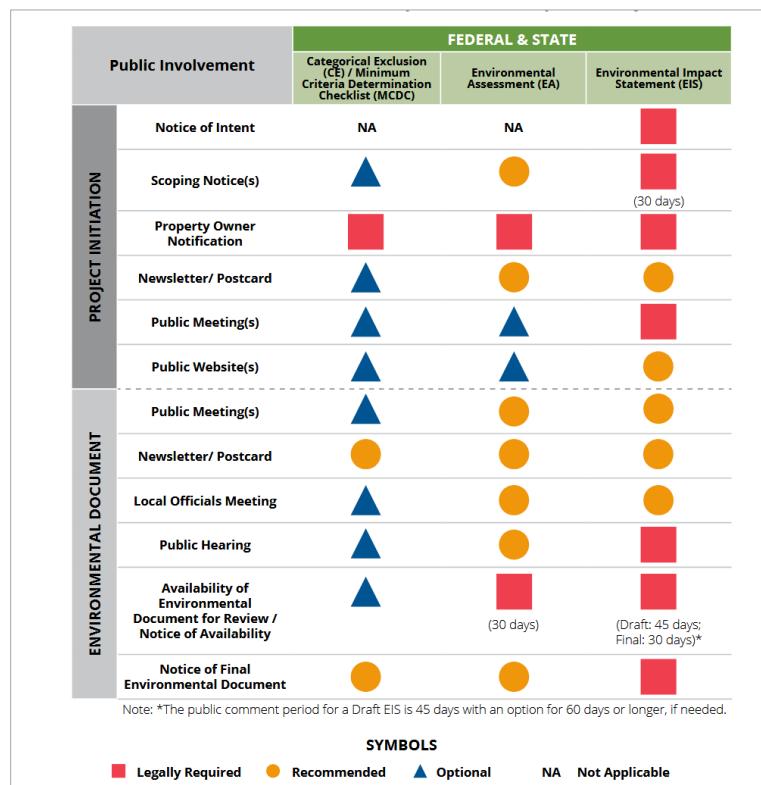
Figure 4. NCDOT's Engagement Requirements Based on Class of Project Action

(Source: Statewide Public Involvement Plan.)

Citations for publications highlighted in this case study appear in **Related Resources**, beginning on page 35.

Conducting Community Engagement

NCDOT conducts some form of public involvement for nearly all projects — ranging from a simple postcard or newsletter (often combined with a PublicInput.com site) to multifaceted public outreach campaigns" (PublicInput offers a community engagement platform for use by state and local governments "to connect with residents, simplify engagement and make data-driven decisions." See **Related Resources** for more information.)

Project Screening Tools

The agency generates two screening reports for transportation projects that are produced before public involvement begins. These reports are generated through the use of the tools described below:

- Direct and Indirect Screening Tool. Requires descriptions of the proposed project, including location, alternatives, land uses and traditionally underserved community issues. A series of questions on potential direct impacts includes:
  - Right of way impacts such as residential or business relocations, reductions in available parking or other property access changes.
  - Impacts to pedestrian, bicycle or parks and recreational facilities.
  - Transit impacts such as stop relocations or accessibility, or notable delays.
  - Changes to local traffic on intersecting routes.
  - Agricultural impacts.

- Community Characteristics Report. Requires detailed information on proposed projects, including maps, community characteristics, potential impacts and cumulative effects, and recommendations. The project planner is prompted to consider issues such as:
  - Bicycle, pedestrian and greenway activities or facilities and active transportation.
  - Business and economic resources and transportation activity.
  - Community resources, cohesion, health and community concerns.
  - Community safety for all road users.
  - Conservation Fund districts or agricultural land and resources.
  - Driveways and cross streets.
  - Emergency medical services (EMS) operations.
  - Local area plans, goals and development activity.
  - Other, recurring, environmental justice and other historically disadvantaged populations.
  - Population growth or decline.
  - Recreational resource or activity.
  - School bus routes.
  - State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP) projects, traffic generation.
  - Transit facilities and activities.

Other suggested data to collect include photographs, input from local officials or schools, and community health indicators.

Public Involvement Resources and Tools

NCDOT provides access to a wealth of resources to support the agency's public engagement efforts:

- [Public Involvement website](#).
- *[Statewide PIP](#)*.
- *[Project Delivery Network (PDN)](#)*.
- *[Public Involvement Practitioner's Guide](#)*.
- [Public Involvement, Community Studies and Visualization (PICSViz)](#).
- [Direct and Indirect Screening Tool](#).
- [Community Characteristics Report](#).
- [Public Engagement Toolkit](#).

Resource Needs

The agency's *Statewide PIP* includes a table identifying resource needs in terms of cost, time and skills for 30 tools, organized in three categories:

- Information distribution.
- Face-to-face interaction.
- Virtual public involvement.

Resource needs, which are categorized as low, medium or high, are discussed on page 7-2 of the plan (page 76 of the PDF).

Visualization Tools

A visualization team helps assess the need for a variety of [visualization products](#) when involving the public in transportation projects. The team creates products such as 3D models and renderings, photosimulations and animations.

Project Characteristics Impacting Community Engagement

A range of project characteristics may trigger or prioritize community engagement. Certain demographics, including historically disadvantaged communities, are considered in a variety of contexts. Survey responses are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Project Characteristics Impacting NCDOT's Community Engagement Priorities

Project Characteristic	Description
Aesthetics	• Downtown areas/urban centers. • Small towns. • Tourism-based economies. • Historic areas.
Budget	Covered in STIP meetings.
Business/Economics	Areas or businesses that: • Will be bypassed. • Will experience notable changes in access management. • Depend on multimodal accessibility.

Project Characteristic	Description
Community Interest	• Traditionally underserved communities. • Tourism-based economies. • Rural areas concerned with transitions to suburban development. • Areas experiencing rapid population growth or demographic change (e.g., retirement, second homes, etc.).

Demographics	• Demographic Study Area or "concentration" of any Block Group with:
	  o 50% or higher minority.
	  o 25% low-income population.
	  o Populations 10 percentage points (minority) or five percentage points (low-income) higher than county average.
	• Known protected populations (no threshold) within or adjacent to the Direct Community Impact Area.

Environment	• Human environment impacts are covered by other project characteristics. • Natural environment impacts are based on stakeholder interests and are covered in the NEPA process.
Equity	Historically underserved communities.
Historical Context	• Traditionally underserved communities. • Areas concerned with displacement or gentrification.
Location	• Urban areas with multimodal networks. • Rural areas with low network connectivity or very long detours.
Traffic	• Superstreets. • Diverging diamond interchanges. • Other similar design/operational changes that may involve controversy and require education.
Tribal Communities or Areas	• Agency archaeology group lead serves as tribal liaison. • Tribal Coordination Protocol/Procedures contains procedures for sending out project Start of Study letters to listing of tribal nations within the state and tribal contacts.

Excluding Community Engagement Activities

Projects that generally do not warrant community engagement include those with no or low impacts such as:

- Replace-in-place bridges.
- Intersection-to-roundabout conversions.
- Repair/rehabilitation.

Emergency rebuild transportation projects in North Carolina involve public outreach but not active engagement unless requested.

Timing the Community Engagement

Community engagement may occur at various points during the project development process. For example, in the first phase of project development — early planning —comprehensive or metropolitan transportation plans at the pre-funding stages and prioritization activities under the STIP may spur some degree of community engagement. Other plans, products and projects that are most likely to prompt some degree of community engagement during the early planning phase include:

- Feasibility studies.
- Express design evaluations investigating conceptual designs and cost estimations.
- Project scoping reports, which include more detailed background and environmental screening data.

NCDOT's October 2024 *Project Delivery Network (PDN)* describes the steps and sequence of activities, tasks and deliverables involved in the remaining phases of the project development process. Public engagement occurs at various levels, and select activities and deliverables are provided for each level, as highlighted below.

Project Initiation

In this phase, public engagement tasks are initiated, including generation of project screening reports. Public engagement under NEPA or the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) is also coordinated, including efforts associated with the merger process, which is used to streamline NEPA and environmental permitting regulatory compliance. Deliverables include documentation of outreach to metropolitan and rural planning organizations related to transportation plans and the *Statewide PIP*. (For more information, see page 150 of *Project Delivery Network (PDN)*.)

Environmental and Right of Way Plans

Public engagement is implemented at this stage. Deliverables include project web pages, public outreach materials and newsletters, meetings and public hearings. (For more information, see page 155 of *Project Delivery Network (PDN).*)

Plans, Specifications and Estimates and Letting

During plans, specifications and estimates (PS&E) phase of the project, construction communications are prepared, including outreach material and a Construction Public Information Plan. (For more information, see page 160 of *Project Delivery Network (PDN)*.)

Determining the Level of Engagement

There is no "one size fits all" for the level of public involvement. Rather the level is determined by the project's scope, potential impacts, demographics and the surrounding context. Page 5-2 of *Statewide PIP* (page 58 of the PDF) recognizes that determining the level of public involvement depends on many project factors, such as:

- Type, size and duration of the project.
- Complexity of the project and project site.
- Significance of direct, indirect, cumulative and disproportionate impacts.
- Number of partners and sources of potential funding.

NCDOT adopts the five levels of engagement identified in the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, which is included in the agency's *Public Involvement Practitioner's Guide*. However, it is unusual for the agency to use Level 5: Empower. Table 6 provides examples of the types of projects, activities and tools for each participation level. For example, NCDOT informs the public on all projects and uses more interactive methods to involve or collaborate with the public on major, complex and controversial projects.

Table 6. Project Types and Activities Based on NCDOT's Levels of Engagement

Level of Engagement	Types of Projects	Activities and Tools
Inform: Provide public with balanced and objective information.	All, including post-NEPA/preconstruction and construction	• Email blasts of construction updates using PublicInput • Fact sheets • Social media
Consult: Obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	• Comprehensive transportation plans • Statewide initiatives • Project development phase • Post-NEPA/preconstruction	• Informational videos • Newsletters/postcards • Public meetings/hearings • PublicInput sites
Involve: Work directly with public to ensure concerns are consistently understood and considered.	Major, complex and controversial projects	• Citizen advisory committees • PublicInput sites • Small group meetings, virtual rooms • Workshop activities (e.g., sticky note exercises, typical section building, organizational and development activities)
Collaborate: Partner with the public in each aspect of decision-making, including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution.	Major, complex and controversial projects	• Citizen advisory committees • PublicInput sites • Small group meetings, virtual rooms • Workshop activities (e.g., sticky note exercises, typical section building, organizational and development activities)
Empower: Place final decision-making in the hands of the public.	Not typical for NCDOT	Not typical for NCDOT

Administering Community Engagement

Funding

NCDOT typically funds public engagement efforts through project budgets.

Consultant Services

Although the agency has a central public involvement team that guides and oversees all engagement efforts, NCDOT began outsourcing the majority of public involvement project work to consultants 12 to 14 years ago. Consultants:

- Prepare materials based on agency guidance and standards.
- Attend outreach efforts along with DOT staff.
- Compile feedback and summarize engagement efforts.

While using consultants is legislatively mandated, bringing in specialty firms to reach traditionally underserved populations provides an added benefit to the agency in that "the people engaging particular communities look like the community whenever possible."

Public involvement consultant costs vary based on project, level of outreach and the firm's approved salaries. While outsourcing public involvement can speed up and increase the volume of work that can

be completed, the survey respondent commented that "[a]ll consultants aren't created equal. [The] level of experience and knowledge of how we do business can lead to more extensive review and rework."

Best Practices

NCDOT is currently focused on improving pre-NEPA public engagement, including data collection and sharing, to streamline the NEPA project development phase. Other agencies establishing guidelines for the timing and level of community engagement could consider clearly defining standards, guidelines and processes to ensure consistency across public involvement efforts. NCDOT has benefited from having a centralized public involvement team.

Related Resources

Tribal Coordination Protocol/Procedures, North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2025.
https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/Environmental/EAU/CR/Archaeology/Documents/NCDOT%20Tribal%20Coordination%20Protocol%20(5).pdf
From the document:

> When does this process/procedure begin and who begins it?

> When sending out project Start of Study letters for projects that have a federal nexus including permits, land, funding, jurisdiction or any other direct involvement from a federal agency. The NCDOT project manager or their NCDOT designee.

Community Engagement Software That Gets More Done, PublicInput, 2025.
https://publicinput.com/
From the website: PublicInput is the [c]ommunity [e]ngagement [p]latform used by state and local governments to connect with residents, simplify engagement and make data-driven decisions.

Statewide Public Involvement Plan, North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2024.
https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/Environmental/EAU/PICSViz/PIDocuments/NCDOT%20Statewide%20Public%20Involvement%20Plan%20-%20July%202024.pdf
From the foreword: The N.C. Department of Transportation developed the NCDOT Statewide Public Involvement Plan (PIP or Plan) to provide statewide public involvement guidance in accordance with federal and state environmental regulations. … This [p]lan focuses on how NCDOT will meet the public involvement requirements of applicable laws and regulations while building a central resource for public involvement practices and procedures. The intended audience for this plan is the practitioners that are implementing public involvement as, for or on behalf of NCDOT.

Community Characteristics Report Template, North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2024.
https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/Environmental/EAU/PICSViz/CSDocuments/CCR%20Template%20October%202024.docx
This 24-page fillable form is used to document community characteristics, impacts and recommendations for projects.

Related Resource:

Community Characteristics Report Guidance, North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2019. https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/Environmental/PDEA%20Consultants/CCR%20Guidance%20July%202019.docx
This guidance addresses components of the report:

- Project initiation and setup.
- Preliminary data gathering.
- Documenting community characteristics, impacts and recommendations.

Project Delivery Network (PDN), North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2024.
https://connect.ncdot.gov/projects/Project-Management/Documents/NCDOT Project Delivery Network.pdf
From the document: The PDN was developed to provide consistency and transparency throughout the project delivery process, enabling project teams to improve reliability and efficiency. The PDN outlines the stages, activities, tasks, deliverables and references to accomplish these ends.

Public Involvement, North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2023.
https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/public-involvement/Pages/default.aspx
From the website: Whenever a transportation project is proposed by NCDOT, the agency's Public Involvement team begins gathering comments from people who could be impacted by construction in their area.

These public comments are used in a variety of ways, including:

- Assisting in the decision-making process about the proposed project by NCDOT.
- Acknowledging and addressing all federal and state requirements.
- Addressing the concerns of residents and business owners impacted by the project.

The Public Involvement team also reaches out to the public as it:

- Engages residents through public meetings (both virtual and in-person).
- Encourages feedback from residents using Public Engagement portal email, postcards/mailers, and other forms of communication.
- Promotes community involvement and seeks out community concerns.

NCDOT Engagement Hub, North Carolina Department of Transportation, undated.
https://ncdot.publicinput.com/
From the website: The NCDOT engagement hub is the online home for outreach and listening efforts to shape the future of North Carolina's transportation infrastructure. Here you can find upcoming events, initiatives and opportunities to share your input on key topics.

Public Involvement Practitioner's Guide, North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2022.
https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/Environmental/EAU/PICSViz/PIDocuments/NCDOT%20PI%20Practitioners%20Guide%20March%202023.pdf
From the welcome: The [g]uide was developed as a supplement to the more detailed NCDOT Statewide Public Involvement Plan (PIP). The [g]uide was prepared by NCDOT's Environmental Analysis Unit (EAU), Public Involvement, Community Studies [and] Visualization Group (PICSViz) to advance public involvement practice for North Carolina transportation planning and project development.

Drawing from the *Statewide PIP*, the [g]uide answers who, what, when, where and how to engage the public and gather useful insights for transportation decisions. The [g]uide specifically focuses on the project development phase. For information on other phases (i.e., planning and programming, final design, construction, operations and maintenance), please refer to the *Statewide PIP*.

Direct and Indirect Screening Tool, North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2019.
https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/Environmental/PDEA%20Consultants/Direct%20and%20Indirect%20Screening%20Tool%20September%202019.docx
This fillable form allows the user to describe the project, alternatives, land use context, "any EJ/LEP [environmental justice/limited English proficiency] from Census data, EJScreen, field observations or local input" and direct and indirect impacts.

N.C. Department of Transportation's Public Engagement Toolkit, North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2014.
https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/Environmental/EAU/PICSViz/PIDocuments/Public%20Engagement%20Toolkit%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf
From the fact sheet: What is the [t]oolkit? It is an online tool that will help transportation professionals better engage the public. Through consistent use of the [t]oolkit, we will be able to better involve the public to inform decision-making, engage historically underserved and underrepresented populations, and focus on the customer to deliver transportation solutions that best serve the public.

Public Involvement, Community Studies and Visualization (PICSViz), North Carolina Department of Transportation, undated.
https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/Environmental/EAU/PICSViz/Pages/default.aspx
This website offers public involvement, community studies and visualization resources.

Related Resource:

Visualization Products, North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2021.
https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/Environmental/EAU/PICSViz/VizDocuments/Visualiztion_Products.pdf
This three-page fact sheet describes 3D models and renderings, photo simulations and animations.

Texas Department of Transportation

Introduction

TxDOT established its public involvement policy in 2011 and continued to make regular updates to it over the years. The most recent update, two years in the making and released in early 2025, employed a multifaceted information-gathering effort to "reflect the changing demographics of Texas." The June 2024 summary of the effort to revamp TxDOT's public engagement guidance noted that "95% of the state change in Texas is attributable to the growth of minority populations."

⇧ See **Informing an Update to Public Engagement Practice** below for more information about development of the TxDOT guidance released in March 2025.

TxDOT's *Strategic Public Engagement Guidance: Texas Department of Transportation's Statewide Approach* was developed to offer guidance for going beyond legally required public engagement. From page 10 of the document (page 6 of the PDF):

> TxDOT's existing *Environmental Public Involvement Handbook* should be applied on projects where completing public involvement activities are legally required, such as during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase of project development. This *Strategic Public Engagement Guidance* should be applied to go above and beyond legally required public involvement activities, as indicated in the TxDOT *Environmental Handbook*.

Note: The TxDOT survey respondent provided a partial response to the survey. Content and topics presented in other case studies in this report may not appear below given the lack of feedback from the respondent. Citations for publications highlighted in this case study are provided in **Related Resources**, beginning on page 44.

### Informing an Update to Public Engagement Practice

In its most recent update of guidance for strategic public engagement, TxDOT used a variety of techniques to develop a suite of best practices and resources for project teams across the state:

- Formed an internal working group and hosted discussions to generate ideas and provide feedback on all components of the research approach.

- Performed desktop research to identify common barriers to public participation and techniques to overcome those barriers.

- Developed and executed a survey with transportation agencies across the country to understand how other states approach community engagement in both internal policy and external practices. Nineteen practitioners in 16 transportation agencies provided input.

- Conducted an online public survey, in partnership with the Institute for Demographic and Socioeconomic Research at the University of Texas, San Antonio, that received nearly 12,000 responses. The survey addressed how Texans prefer to receive information, share feedback and

participate in engagement events. Focus group discussions with public volunteers delved deeper into survey findings.

Preparing to incorporate the new guidance to ensure consistent application across the agency and by consultants involved a 25-district implementation effort that included workshops and meetings, development of an internal resource hub, and presentations and memos for and by agency leadership.

The research activities that TxDOT conducted to develop the new guidance are illustrated in Figure 5.
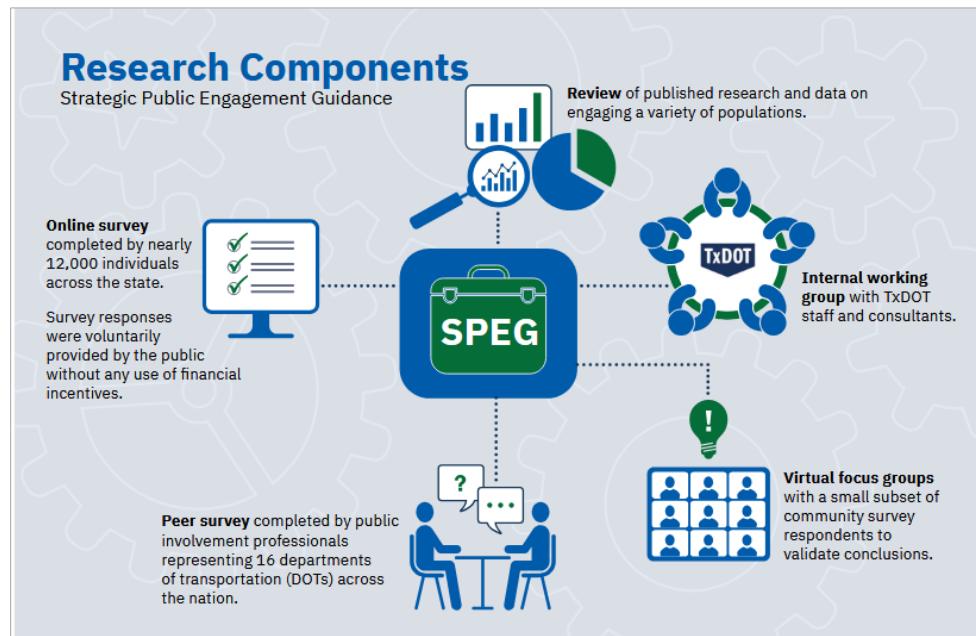
Figure 5. Research Activities Conducted for TxDOT's New Public Engagement Guidance
(*Source*: *Strategic Public Engagement Guidance*.)

The four key messages that TxDOT sought to deliver as it was developing the new guidance were:

- Build a community profile and target techniques.
- Consider accessibility beyond translation to serve everyone, including low income, low education and elderly users and people with disabilities.
- Be clear with the public on what feedback is needed and how it will be used.
- Close the loop.

Throughout the six-chapter publication, symbols highlight key research findings and indicate the start of recommended action steps. Each chapter concludes with recommendations.

Conducting Community Engagement

Instead of relying on specific project characteristics to trigger and help prioritize public engagement, TxDOT considers that "anything unique" — demographics, project location, potential business impact, even political considerations and elected officials' goals for communities — signals the need for a public

involvement planning conversation. The agency's 25 district offices and divisions follow this new statewide public involvement guidance.

Timing the Community Engagement

Rather than delaying engagement for specific project phases, TxDOT recommends early outreach that begins as soon as the basics of a project or study can be communicated. Districts are encouraged to develop project pages, conduct meetings and perform other stakeholder outreach along with early online engagement efforts. Below are the six phases of the agency's public involvement process:

Phase 1: Early planning phase. States the proposed project's purpose and need.

Types of plans, products and projects:

- Planning and environmental linkages studies.
- Feasibility studies.
- Corridor studies.

Phase 2: Project development phase. Occurs before project approval.

Types of products and projects:

- PIP.

Phase 3: Project approval and environmental phase. Includes a constructability review.

Types of products and projects: No information provided.

Figure 6 identifies TxDOT's public engagement and outreach goals.
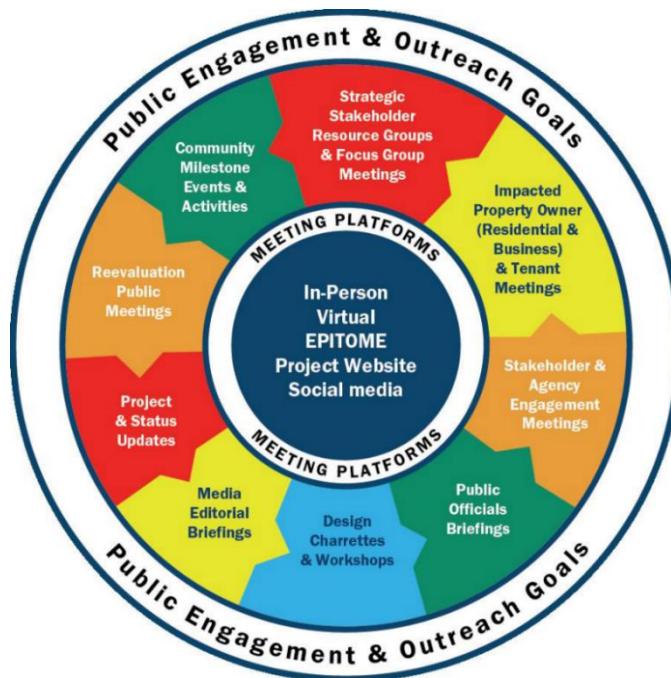
Figure 6. TxDOT's Public Engagement and Outreach Goals
(*Source*: Texas Department of Transportation.)

Phase 4: Plans, specifications and estimates (PS&E). Begins after selection of the preferred alternative.

    Types of products and projects:

- More public meetings or hearings.

Phase 5: Construction. After contract approval, authorizes construction of the project.

    Types of products and projects: Where possible during the construction phase, discuss:

- Timing access changes.
- Other problems or concerns.

Phase 6: Post-construction and maintenance. Includes final inspections, community feedback and collaboration with stakeholders.

    Types of products and projects:

- Report-a-pothole-type postcard communications.
- Stakeholder meetings.
- Additional outreach.

Determining the Level of Engagement

Rather than applying the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation to identify the levels of community engagement, TxDOT's recently published guidance focuses on four key elements:

- Researching the community.
- Engaging with intention.
- Minimizing barriers to engagement.
- Building community partnerships.

TxDOT's guidance can be applied to a project or study in any phase of development, whether short or long term, from feasibility through construction. Below are highlights from each of the four key elements.

Researching the Community

In the first step of TxDOT's outreach planning, the agency works to understand the audience and develop a community research document.

TxDOT's survey of peer agencies indicated that almost all of the 16 responding agencies use population demographics of the study or project area to identify the community groups that are present. The peer agency survey also identified varying thresholds that are used to identify groups with a significant need for specific outreach and accommodation (for example, 5% to 10% of a local population and/or 1,000 people) as contrasted with a case-by-case assessment that employs staff experience and expertise.

An instruction-based template helps agency staff gather U.S. Census Bureau data from American Community Survey data profiles. Additional data sources are provided with an assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Key recommendations:

- Use census data and supplemental resources to better understand the community.

- Revisit the community research document with each public involvement (PI) phase to increase efficiency and reduce potential project delays.
- Review and discuss key questions addressed in this assessment during initial PI planning meetings at each point of public outreach.

Engaging with Intention

After completing the community research document, planning and executing an entire phase of public engagement can begin. Recognizing that projects of varying scale will require engagement, the guidance allows for flexibility and is "designed to help prioritize what is vital for your project and what can be achieved within your means."

Table 7 presents content excerpted from Chapter 4 of *Strategic Public Engagement Guidance* that describes seven steps to crafting effective engagement.

Table 7. TxDOT's Seven Steps for Planning and Executing Public Engagement

Step	Timing	Objective
Step 1 – Define the Project and Community	Complete this activity concurrently with development of the project's PIP. Revisit to update and revise at the beginning of each PI phase of the project.	Establish consistent messaging on the project. Determine what feedback is needed and from whom feedback is needed.
Step 2 – Research the Community	Complete this activity concurrently with development of the project's PIP.	Explore who lives in, works in and frequents the communities selected for engagement and which groups within those communities might require particular attention in planning engagement.
Step 3 – Determine Involvement Needs	Initiate this activity concurrently with development of the project's PIP. Revisit to build out details as an initial step to planning an engagement, typically three months before engagement begins.	Research the community to identify specific considerations that need to be accounted for when planning engagement opportunities and the promotion of those opportunities.
Step 4 – Plan Involvement Opportunities	Initiate this task two to three months before engagement begins.	Design engagement opportunities based on the input that is needed, who it should come from and what considerations need to be accounted for. Think beyond traditional public meetings. There are many options for engagement.
Step 5 – Plan and Implement Promotional Activities	Initiate this task two months before engagement begins. Think beyond traditional newspaper advertisements. There are many ways to conduct promotional activities.	With engagement opportunities planned, begin promoting the opportunities to the public using what was learned about the community to inform these promotional activities.
Step 6 – Hold Involvement Opportunities	Initiate this task immediately before the scheduled engagement.	Conduct the planned involvement opportunities and collect the input needed.
Step 7 – Summarize and Reflect	Initiate this task immediately after engagements are completed.	Learn from the successes and shortcomings of this round of engagement. Prepare to form a feedback loop with partners and the public.

Minimizing Barriers to Engagement

A series of "one-pagers" created by the agency describe 10 common barriers to public involvement:

- Venue accessibility.
- Materials accessibility.
- Unsuitable venues.
- Limited English proficiency.
- Uneasiness/wariness of government interaction.
- Cultural/personal values.
- Personal obligations.
- Limited skills/education.
- Misunderstanding of process.
- Misunderstanding of project.

In addition to offering techniques that can minimize or eliminate each barrier, the one-pagers offer additional considerations, common examples of each barrier and links to supplementary guidance. Staff members are advised to review this guidance during initial public involvement planning and incorporate actions that will minimize these barriers as they move into each phase of public engagement.

Building Community Partnerships

TxDOT's survey of peer agencies identified that local partnerships with various entities "are among the best strategies for engaging harder-to-reach populations" and noted the importance of establishing long-term relationships. The guidance's action steps include these potential partnership groups:

- Local leaders.
- Business community.
- Civic groups.
- Advocacy groups.
- Education community.
- Cultural organizations.
- Faith-based organizations.

Once partners are identified, staff members are advised to identify their goals, begin planning, implement their plan and ensure ongoing communication. To build lasting relationships, the guidance advises:

- Be clear about the purpose of the partnership.
- Familiarize yourself with the group or organization.
- Begin outreach and engagement early in the process.
- Work with partners to set expectations.

Administering Community Engagement

Consultant Services

While the respondent did not address how the agency works with consultants when engaging with the public, the agency's March 2025 guidance indicates that "the PI Section will work with districts, divisions and consultants to implement these strategies on an ongoing basis." The guidance further notes that it "directs recommended best practices for agency staff and consultants to use to ensure project delivery as public input informs the decision-making process."

Related Resources

Strategic Public Engagement Guidance, Texas Department of Transportation, 2025.
https://www.txdot.gov/projects/planning/strategic-public-engagement-guidance.html
From the website: This will be a "living guide" that continues to evolve.

It is written and designed for easy, effective and efficient implementation by TxDOT's project teams at both the state and district level, as well as any other organizations across the country conducting public involvement as part of their own projects.

The guidance includes a checklist for planning effective public involvement, resources for conducting community research and forging partnerships with local stakeholders and advocates, guides for identifying and overcoming the most common barriers to public participation, and more.

Strategic Public Engagement Guidance: Texas Department of Transportation's Statewide Approach, Texas Department of Transportation, March 2025.
https://www.txdot.gov/content/dam/docs/division/str/strategic-public-engagement-guidance-040925.pdf
This guidance is the product of an intensive effort to identify goals and objectives, conduct research to inform agency practices, and develop a 25-district approach to implementing public involvement activities. The guidance includes:

- Introduction and understanding of the importance of public involvement (Chapters 1 and 2).
- Research the community (Chapter 3).
- Engaging with intention (Chapter 4).
- Minimizing barriers to engagement (Chapter 5).
- Building community partnerships (Chapter 6).

Related Resource:

> **Strategic Public Engagement Guidance,** Texas Department of Transportation, June 2024.
> https://transportation.org/communications/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/10/Category-02a-Texas.pdf
> This publication describes the development of the updated public engagement guidance cited above.

Resources for Limited English Proficiency: Spanish Communications and Guidance, Texas Department of Transportation, May 2025.
https://ftp.txdot.gov/pub/txdot/get-involved/tpp/speg/070725-spanish-communications-guidance.pdf
From the introduction: Effective outreach is critical to ensure timely project delivery, reduce cost and streamline public involvement processes through consistent guidance. Therefore, to produce the best possible public involvement and satisfy needs presented by the districts, the Public Involvement (PI) Section of the Texas Department of Transportation's (TxDOT) Transportation Planning and Programming (TPP) Division initiated a research project to evaluate TxDOT's English-to-Spanish translation practices, comprehend best practices, increase engagement opportunities and cultivate two-way communication with Texas communities on existing and future projects.

As a result of this research, this guidance contains useful techniques to help project teams communicate effectively with their project communities. Furthermore, this guidance offers a summary of the TPP PI Section's research and presents fact sheets and documents that highlight demographic data for all 25

TxDOT districts, district-specific resources, a translation guide of transportation terms, and comprehensive recommendations to enhance engagement practices with Spanish speakers.

Public Involvement Toolkit, Texas Department of Transportation, 2025.
https://www.txdot.gov/business/resources/environmental/compliance-toolkits/public-involvement.html
From the website: This page contains guidance and templates for conducting and documenting public involvement in connection with the environmental review of a project.

Section 5.7.1 Formal Public Involvement and Additional Public Outreach, Project Development Process Manual, Texas Department of Transportation, November 2024.
https://www.txdot.gov/manuals/des/pdp/chapter-5--environmental-and-public-involvement/5-7-public-involvement/5-7-1-formal-public-involvement-and-additional-pub.html
This publication identifies the various guidance controlling TxDOT's public involvement practices, including how project teams are "encouraged to perform additional informal outreach with affected members of the public. Such informal outreach may include small group meetings, telephone conferences, online engagement surveys or emails with individuals or groups." *From the website:*

> Requirements for "formal" public involvement (PI) are outlined in the Environmental Handbook – Public Involvement (i.e., a notice and opportunity to comment, public meeting, opportunity for public hearing, public hearing and various types of required notices). However, consistent with TxDOT's overall public involvement policy, the project team is encouraged to perform additional informal outreach with affected members of the public. Such informal outreach may include small group meetings, telephone conferences, online engagement surveys or emails with individuals or groups. This outreach should be performed with stakeholders such as business owners, property owners, homeowners' associations, residents of the community that the project is serving, etc., as appropriate — this "additional public outreach" should be documented in ECOS [Environmental Compliance Oversight System].

"TxDOT Leverages Community Partnerships," *EDC News*, Center for Accelerating Innovation, Federal Highway Administration, May 30, 2024.
https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovation/everydaycounts/edcnews/20240530.cfm
From the online article:

> The Strategic Public Engagement Guidance features easy to apply best practices and tools. … TxDOT gathered research for this document through a peer survey, which received 19 responses representing 16 states, and a community survey, which received nearly 12,000 responses. TxDOT understood the importance of community partners in connecting its messages to harder-to-reach audiences, thus TxDOT's PI Section developed a plan to connect personally with organizations across the state to ask for support in sharing the [a]gency's community survey with their contacts. ….

> As a result, TxDOT gained a wealth of information sourced directly from the communities it serves. This helped inform the [a]gency's new public engagement guidance on topics including:
> - How Texans prefer to participate in information sharing with TxDOT.
> - What may prevent or discourage Texans from participating in TxDOT's feedback opportunities.
> - What TxDOT could do to encourage participation at in-person and online meetings.
> - Preferences on dates and times for in-person participation.
> - Preferred sources of information on TxDOT projects.

Utah Department of Transportation

Introduction

Utah DOT (UDOT) is the second of two agencies not responding to the project survey that are highlighted in this report's case studies. This examination summarizes key elements of UDOT's public engagement practices drawing solely from the agency's published guidance.

UDOT has many publicly available resources on its Public Involvement Resources website that describe how the agency determines when and at what level to engage the public in transportation planning and projects.

The Project Outreach Planner (POP) is UDOT's primary tool for determining the timing and level of public involvement needed for transportation projects. As described in the planner's introduction:

> As a [d]epartment, UDOT's goal is to reduce overall impacts to the public while meeting transportation needs. As such, planning for and executing appropriate strategies to involve and communicate with the public at large and with individual stakeholders throughout the life cycle of [a] transportation project is critical. From the time a project is considered in concept to the stage when it is constructed and being maintained, the public's needs, concerns and questions must be taken into account and addressed to achieve the goal of reducing impacts.

> To effectively manage project outreach plans and activities, project managers and project teams need information and tools to analyze the depth and breadth of outreach needs in order to decide how best to meet them. The Project Outreach Planner (POP) is that resource. The following pages outline a path and provide tools for analyzing and quantifying project outreach needs, which will ultimately lead to appropriate and efficient outreach management.

Citations for publications highlighted in this case study appear in **Related Resources**, beginning on page 50.

Conducting Community Engagement

UDOT involves the public in its long-range transportation plan, and other plans and programs, in accordance with the agency's Public Participation Plan: FY 2023-2026. UDOT's Solutions Development process is intended to strengthen the connection between Utah's Transportation Vision and project delivery. Utah's Transportation Vision is a collaboration among UDOT, partnering agencies and other stakeholders to establish a shared vision for statewide transportation across all modes.

Over three planning phases — context, problem and solutions — the Solutions Development process is used to:

- Understand community context, challenges and concerns to form goals and objectives.
- Identify area needs and opportunities, and develop evaluation criteria to ensure solutions meet community goals and objectives.
- Develop and evaluate transportation solutions.

Examples of various considerations, context data and outreach questions, summarized below, inform the timing and level of public engagement throughout the Solutions Development process:

Identifying stakeholders. Fundamental questions help define who should be involved:

- Who are the potential stakeholders in the area? What are their interests?
- Are there stakeholders that should be included in early discussions, such as resource or regulatory agencies?
- Which communities are directly and indirectly impacted by the transportation corridor or area?

Understanding community context. Community values and related social, economic, health, risk and resiliency factors are informed by exploring data describing:

- Schools and libraries.
- National landmarks and historic places.
- Agricultural land.
- Population and housing density.
- Social vulnerability.

Determining public involvement scope. In addition to understanding the timing of the study and potential implementation, information needs, and platforms to engage the public, questions to explore the scope of public involvement include:

- Is there a reason to hold a meeting?
- Is there a known concern in the community?
- Is there unrest in the community?
- Is the public actively engaged in the study?

Project Outreach Planner

The process presented in the *POP* is incorporated into UDOT's current design process networks, such as the Concept Report Network, Project Delivery Network and Local Government Network, to incorporate outreach budget needs, activities and roles throughout a project.

Identifying the scope of public engagement begins with determining the stage of a project. *POP* notes that two categories of projects "have been developed to catch all potential transportation impacts in Utah" — preconstruction and construction:

- The *preconstruction* category "is designed to help determine the appropriate level of early public involvement as early as possible in project development" and includes:
  - Concept plans.
  - Design phase.
  - Environmental phase.
- The *construction* category includes projects in these subcategories:
  - Construction.
  - Construction manager/general contractor.
  - Design build.
  - Maintenance.
  - Orange/purple book, which refers to pavement preservation projects.

POP Score Calculation

Fillable worksheets for each project category include multiple-choice questions to identify stakeholder needs, issues and concerns with respect to a transportation project. The *POP* includes descriptions of each question and the range of considerations that may be implicated by the question. Each question's answer choices are equally weighted in a scoring range of 1 to 5 and then averaged to produce the POP score. The POP score is used to recommend a POP level of 1 to 5, with "[o]ne representing the most minimal public outreach effort and five representing the most robust and extensive level of public outreach." An example worksheet is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. UDOT's Project Outreach Planner Preconstruction Worksheet
(*Source*: Utah Department of Transportation.)

Determining the Level of Community Engagement

The project manager can check the POP score against typical project descriptions, identified on pages 9 through 11 of the planner, to refine the determination of the appropriate public engagement level for a given project. Typical projects are described in the *POP* based on criteria that include political interest, project area and duration, project impacts and public interest (see Table 8 below). The descriptions of Level 3 and Level 4 projects are the same in the planner.

Table 8. Typical Project Descriptions for UDOT's POP Levels

POP Level (Score)	Political Interest	Project Area	Project Duration	Project Impacts	Public Interest
Level 1 (0 – 1)	Low; coordination of a few agencies needed	Confined to a small area	Brief	Few, if any, direct impacts to public and property owners	Low or supportive of project

POP Level (Score)	Political Interest	Project Area	Project Duration	Project Impacts	Public Interest
Level 2 (1.1 – 2)	Low; coordination of a few agencies needed	Confined to a single city or section of a county	Brief	Minor impacts to traveling public and adjacent stakeholders or longer duration with little to no impact	Low or supportive of project
Level 3 (2.1 – 3)	Moderate; more agency coordination needed	May span two or three communities	May last an entire construction season	Moderate impacts to traveling public and adjacent stakeholders	Increasing; potential conflict or department or project detractors
Level 4 (3.1 – 4)	Moderate; more agency coordination needed	May span two or three communities	May last an entire construction season	Moderate impacts to traveling public and adjacent stakeholders	Increasing; potential conflict or department or project detractors
Level 5 (4.1 – 5)	Considerable; potential decision-maker interest and increasing agency and interest group coordination needed	Large, with extensive project or study area	May span years	Heavy impacts such as extensive right of way takings and severe lane restrictions and delays	High; likelihood of conflict and potential for negative agency perceptions

Because projects can change over time in complexity, strategy or tasks, the worksheet should be repeated as many times as necessary to reflect the evolution of a project and the public's interest. The agency recognizes that each public involvement strategy must be custom-designed to support the specific project.

A budget estimating tool helps approximate public engagement budgeting, including contractor or third-party involvement and direct expenses. Finally, the *POP* provides recommendations based on a project's POP level, staffing, tools and techniques for public involvement.

Public Outreach Tools

While the public outreach tools identified in Table 9 are not required for the three phases of project development under each POP level, agency guidance notes that these tools and techniques "when done right, have proved successful at effectively involving the public."

Table 9. UDOT's Public Outreach Tools by POP Level

POP Level	Environmental Phase	Design Phase	Construction Phase
Level 1	• Agency/municipal notification • Letters to key stakeholders	• Continued agency and stakeholder coordination • News release	• Fliers • Impacted stakeholder contacts • Know where know why updates • News release • Social media updates • UDOT summary website • Variable message sign boards

POP Level	Environmental Phase	Design Phase	Construction Phase
Level 2	• Agency/municipal notification • Key stakeholder coordination • Project flier • Social media • UDOT summary website	• Level 1 tools	• Level 1 tools • 511 updates • EMS coordination • Stakeholder availability
Level 3	• Level 2 tools • Advisory committees • Facilitated decision-making • Media relations • Newsletters (paper and electronic) • Online surveying • Open house/hearing • Outreach to environmental justice populations • Project-specific website • Special interest group outreach	• Community advisory committee • Continued agency and stakeholder coordination • EMS contacts • Newsletter updates • Project website updates • School district contacts • Social media updates	• Level 2 tools • Conflict resolution/mediation • Construction coordination team • Media relations • Preconstruction open house • Preconstruction partnering session • Project website updates • School district/busing coordination • Trucking industry/motor carriers advisory board coordination
Level 4	• Level 3 tools • Focus groups • Neighborhood association outreach • Paid media • Partnering workshops • Preproject conflict assessment • Site tour	• Selected Level 3 tools • Chamber of commerce/transportation group/city council presentations • Civic organization/senior center presentations • Right of way process support • Site tour	• Level 3 tools • Agency/municipal leadership updates • Electronic newsletter updates • Neighborhood association outreach • Paid media • Transit coordination
Level 5	• Level 4 tools • Policy-level problem-solving • Process evaluation	• Level 4 tools • Committees • Partnering workshops • Policy-level problem-solving • Site/concept tour	• Level 4 tools • Policy-level problem-solving

Administering Community Engagement

Consultant Services

POP recommends using a third-party public involvement consultant to execute activities for Levels 3 through 5; third-party public involvement consultants may also be considered for Levels 1 and 2.

Related Resources

Public Involvement Resources, Utah Department of Transportation, 2025.
https://www.udot.utah.gov/connect/business/piresources/
This website offers access to a range of resources:

• UDOT Branding, Resources, Guides and Plans includes style and writing guides, social media plans and guidelines, Public Participation Plan and logos/templates.

- Study and Project Setup and Branding includes style guides, project evaluations forms and other administrative resources.
- Public Meetings includes meeting checklists, requirements and sign-in sheet.
- Civil Rights and Title VI includes a number of resources to ensure access to all users.
- Additional Project Resources includes processes and tools for full-freeway closure, noise analyses and raised medians.

Solutions Development, Utah Department of Transportation, undated.
https://sites.google.com/utah.gov/solutionsdevelopment/solutions-development
From the website: Solutions Development is UDOT's planning process that seeks to capture the unique context of an area or corridor and develop a set of solutions to meet its transportation needs. This process supports a strong connection between Utah's Transportation Vision and [p]roject [d]elivery.

Project Outreach Planner (POP), Utah Department of Transportation, undated.
https://drive.google.com/open?id=1_VyHC8ekPTwsvIMzaz2Bs-mgh5Y_R3ET
As described on the UDOT Public Involvement Resources web page, "The POP was developed to help study and project teams determine the level of public involvement needed."

The *POP* enables users to calculate a POP score to determine the appropriate level of public involvement and provides typical project descriptions, budget estimates and recommendations for staffing and tools. The publication also distinguishes NEPA requirements, referring the reader to Chapter 5 of the *UDOT Environmental Process Manual*. *From Worksheet Descriptions, page 21:*

> NEPA requires that an appropriate public process be followed to provide the critical public perspective in an environmental analysis. Beyond that, however, transportation departments and decisionmakers are well served by involving the public to the appropriate degree, even going beyond the minimum NEPA requirements, when considering a proposed transportation action. Doing so provides the Department with better credibility, builds the relationship of trust necessary for sustainable transportation solutions and leads to better decisions most of the time. An environmental process that is informed by a variety of perspectives is infinitely more defensible and often provides better solutions.

Utah Department of Transportation Public Participation Plan: FY 2023 – 2026, Utah Department of Transportation, 2023.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JgLxP8-m7IWQM7k9NuoyZQN7mKKtaoHV/view?usp=sharing
From the background: The UDOT Public Participation Plan (PPP) is used to develop and adopt the Long Range Transportation Plan, Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP), as well as other plans and programs. The PPP provides a guide for effective engagement of a broad array of constituencies, interests and organizations in statewide planning efforts. By identifying methods and opportunities for participation, UDOT can improve its plans and programs and ensure an equitable distribution of transportation benefits to all Utahns. The Public Participation Plan should be used as a template or starting point for all UDOT [d]ivisions, [r]egions and other internal groups. All users are encouraged to review and enhance their public processes beyond the PPP to the degree appropriate to their given projects and public outreach efforts in an effort to better address the specific needs of the public.

"How Utah DOT Used Broad Representation to Advance Its Public Involvement," PublicInput, 2023.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzoKPzUAZSg
From the video description: Watch Elizabeth McMillan, [d]irector of Communication for the Utah Department of Transportation, share how her organization is utilizing technology and creative strategies to meet public involvement challenges and engage the public in their decision-making processes.

Transportation Project Overview, Utah Department of Transportation, 2017.
https://www.udot.utah.gov/projectpages/TIGSOWNER.gf?f=Business-%20Partners%20for%20the%20Road%20Ahead.pdf
This nine-page publication for businesses describes the transportation project process. *From the document*:

> *Public Involvement/Information (PI) Manager*: UDOT projects with significant community impacts are assigned a PI [public information] [m]anager to handle stakeholder communications, disseminate project information, and host and/or facilitate public meetings and committee groups. These individuals are most often your primary point-of-contact when a project is underway.
> ….

> *Public Involvement Coordinator (PIC)*: Every UDOT [r]egion has a PIC to oversee and coordinate public involvement activities.

> If a PI [m]anager is not assigned to a project, PICs are your next best source to obtain project information.

Related Research and Resources

Presented below is a small sampling of domestic publications that are organized into two topic areas:

- National guidance.
- State guidance and practices.

Note: Additional publications appear in **Related Resources** at the close of each of the five case studies in the **Survey of Practice** portion of this report.

National Guidance

Research in Progress: NCHRP Project 08-161, Cultivating Accountability Through Meaningful Public Engagement, National Cooperative Highway Research Program, start date: November 2023; expected completion date: May 2026.
Project description at https://apps.trb.org/cmsfeed/TRBNetProjectDisplay.asp?ProjectID=5139
From the objective: The objective of this research is to develop a manual with practical strategies, processes, methods and procedures for understanding and establishing meaningful public engagement in transportation decision-making with an emphasis on the engagement of vulnerable communities. The manual will address institutional and practical barriers and include appropriate instruction on the design and execution of public engagement processes and methods that lead to meaningful public engagement in transportation decision-making.
….

Products of this research will include the following deliverables and/or manual contents:

- A manual of practice that provides practical strategies, processes, methods and/or procedures for cultivating meaningful public engagement in transportation decision-making;

- Communications media and/or training modules that provide a snapshot of the direction provided in the other products regarding how to plan for and execute meaningful public engagement in transportation. Examples may include videos or PowerPoint slide decks targeting different audiences of the research, such as agency executives, practitioners and elected officials;

- Robust implementation plan that articulates a strategy for marketing and bringing this set of resources to the state DOT community;

- Transportation decision-making process milestone chart indicating when and how to engage the public. This could be delivered within the contents of, or as an appendix to, the manual;

- An annotated bibliography of available resources for agencies and members of the public to use to strengthen their public engagement programs and activities in transportation decision-making; and

- Conduct of Research report that documents the entire research process, data collected, recommendations and products developed.

Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision-Making, U.S. Department of Transportation, October 2022.
https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2022-10/Promising%20Practices%20for%20Meaningful%20Public%20Involvement%20in%20Transportation%20Decision-making.pdf
From the introduction: This guide contains promising practices around meaningful public involvement and participation that can help USDOT funding recipients comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and other existing requirements. Appendix A contains a non-exhaustive overview of existing policies and processes where public involvement is a requirement. This may help identify areas where you can take immediate action to implement meaningful public involvement. In addition, the guide can help funding recipients ensure that public participation is meaningful. The section on Building Public Involvement Capacity discusses how meaningful public involvement should be a core organizational competency integrated into all aspects of your work and transportation decision-making.

AASHTO Public Involvement Peer Exchange: Summary Report, Center for Environmental Excellence, American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, June 2021.
https://environment.transportation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AASHTO-PI-Peer-Exchange-Summary_Final.pdf
From the background:

> AASHTO selected four lead states to provide examples of their public involvement practice and lessons learned for the peer exchange: Minnesota (MnDOT), North Carolina (NCDOT), Pennsylvania (PennDOT) and Utah (UDOT). An additional six states participated in the exchange: Colorado, Georgia, Montana, Ohio, Oregon and Washington State. Topics identified for the exchange included:
>
> - Current status of DOT public involvement programs (including changes brought about by the pandemic);
> - Planning and project development frameworks that shape public involvement;
> - Project development case studies, including those with a focus on the engagement of underrepresented communities;
> - Federal perspectives on public outreach, public hearings and environmental justice;
> - The role of data in planning and evaluating public involvement; and
> - Emerging methods and approaches in public involvement.

NCHRP Research Report 905: Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Involvement in Transportation Planning and Project Development, Bruce Brown, Kate Gunby, Jamie Strausz-Clark, Anne Frugé, Shaun Glaze, Mackenzie Findlay, Jordan Tuia and Ian Hajnosz, 2019.
Publication available at https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/25447
From the foreword: *NCHRP Research Report 905* presents a toolkit for measuring the effectiveness of public involvement activities. The toolkit is designed to collect feedback from the public on several indicators of effectiveness and to compare that feedback with the agency's own perceptions. The combined responses can then be used to calculate scores for each indicator and an overall effectiveness index. This allows for systematic comparison of the effectiveness of different public involvement strategies over time.
….

The toolkit includes a survey instrument for use with the public (suitable for distribution in printed form or online), an electronic survey for transportation agency staff to enable the agency to score itself, a spreadsheet-based scoring tool for converting survey response data into an effectiveness index, and

guidelines for using and scoring the survey. The survey instruments, scoring tool and guidelines presentation are available at the TRB website (www.trb.org) by searching for "*NCHRP Research Report 905*." Also available online on the same website are several appendices detailing the technical methods used to develop and refine the tool and a set of presentation slides summarizing the project. [See https://apps.trb.org/cmsfeed/TRBNetProjectDisplay.asp?ProjectID=4935.]

Improving Public Engagement, Smart Growth America, Governors' Institute on Community Design, 2019.
https://wordpress.smartgrowthamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Improving-public-engagement_FINAL.pdf
From page 1 of the publication:

> State DOT leadership and staff generally understand the importance of robust community engagement. However, that level and quality of engagement happen less frequently in practice because it is expensive and time consuming to conduct for every project. In reality, DOTs generally go to the public seeking approval and buy-in for a concept staff have already developed rather than to seeking meaningful input that could change their approach.
>
> The recommendations below all aim to change the agency's approach to public engagement, as well as how it is conducted.

From page 2 of the publication:

> This first step is to be clear internally on how much influence stakeholders will have. For example, will stakeholders be driving the process? Can their input lead to substantial changes in the scope? Or is the project at a point in the process where their feedback could only produce minor changes? Is the purpose of the engagement more about conveying information? Being clear about this internally helps guide how project teams approach the engagement and makes it easier to communicate expectations explicitly with stakeholders, which can reduce their frustrations and build trust.

State Guidance and Practices

Multiple States

"Transportation Academies as Catalysts for Civic Engagement in Transportation Decision-Making," Nathan McNeil, Keith Bartholomew and Matthew Ryan, *Transportation Research Record 2677*, Issue 10, pages 849-862, 2023 (accepted manuscript).
https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1377&context=usp_fac
From the abstract: Citizen planning academies, which became popular in the 1990s, are increasingly being used in transportation planning and decision-making contexts. By making use of a longer-term, multiweek educational format, transportation academies have the potential to reduce barriers and enhance community capital leading to more meaningful and sustained government–community interaction. This paper tracks the rise of transportation academies in North America and provides a detailed look at two academies: one in Portland, Oregon, with a 30-year history, and another recently launched in the Salt Lake City, Utah, region. Post-academy surveys of participants provided data that illuminated whether the transportation academy model was effective in fostering greater and longer-term community engagement. Using an evaluation framework developed for assessing citizen planning academies, the data indicated positive outcomes and provide a basis for further expansion of the use of academy-type engagement initiatives.

Florida

Emerging Practices in Community Engagement for Transportation Planning, Dennis Smith, Billie Ventimiglia, Mark Horner, Gianna Brooks and Jacob Tagnan, Florida Department of Transportation, June 2025.
https://fdotwww.blob.core.windows.net/sitefinity/docs/default-source/research/reports/fdot-bed30-977-16-rpt.pdf?sfvrsn=41c0385e_3
From the executive summary:

> *Outreach and Engagement Practices*
> The Decision Support Guidebook aligns public involvement methods with each phase of FDOT's [Florida Department of Transportation's] transportation project development process: Planning, [p]roject [d]evelopment and [e]nvironment (PD&E), [d]esign, [r]ight-of-[w]ay [a]cquisition, [c]onstruction and [m]aintenance. Effective practices identified through field input fall into several key categories.
>
> For the purposes of this study, engagement and outreach were defined as two separate activities. "Outreach" was defined as the act of notifying the public about an issue (such as a project) or an opportunity (such as a meeting), while "engagement" refers to how transportation professionals involve the public in decision-making and solicit their feedback.
>
> For outreach, FDOT practitioners emphasized the need to combine broad notification with targeted communication strategies:
> - Location-based outreach such as Every Door Direct Mail remains widely used, especially in rural areas and for older populations.
> - Digital tools such as geofencing and platforms like Facebook and Peachjar are used to target specific demographic groups, including commuters and parents.
> - Combining channels such as flyers, media releases, email and social media helps increase message reach and reinforce awareness.
>
> For engagement, the most effective strategies are those that encourage two-way interaction and lower barriers to participation:
> - Informal formats such as pop-up events and public displays allow engagement in familiar locations, increasing visibility and participation.
> - Virtual meetings, online polling tools such as Slido and digital comment platforms offer flexibility and accessibility for a range of users.
> - Alternatives such as drive-through meetings and mail-back surveys provide options for individuals with limited digital access or scheduling constraints.

Outreach infographics included in the final report's appendix "are intended to be used by FDOT staff and consultants and to serve as a model for the format and depth of future training materials."

Related Resource:

> **Public Engagement Resource Guide**, Florida Department of Transportation, 2022.
> https://www.fdot.gov/planning/policy/community-engagement/resource-guide.shtm
> *From the website*: Welcome to the Public Engagement Resource Guide page. Guidance and tools are available here for FDOT project managers and staff to foster effective and meaningful public engagement during all project phases.

Public Involvement Handbook, Florida Department of Transportation, 2023.
https://fdotwww.blob.core.windows.net/sitefinity/docs/default-source/planning/public-engagement-resource-guide/pi-handbook-october2023.pdf?sfvrsn=4db180b8_14
Chapter 3 describes levels of public involvement during the six phases of project development: planning; project development and environment; design; construction; alternative project delivery; and operations and maintenance.

Discussion of the agency's Community Awareness Plan (CAP) begins on page 21 of the handbook (page 29 of the PDF) and addresses how use of the plan can help to identify appropriate outreach activities and level of community engagement:

3.3.1 Community Awareness Plan (CAP)

A CAP is an effective way of identifying appropriate outreach activities based on the type of project and potential community concerns. The CAP is developed by the design team and should be specific to each project. Most importantly, the CAP should provide a strategic plan to maintain support and achieve the following:

- Determine design implications in relation to community impacts.
- Ensure commitments are met.
- Allow for additional community engagement when necessary to address public concern.
- Develop Maintenance of Traffic plans for use during construction.

FDOT CAP [g]uidelines for design and construction identify four levels of community engagement based on the type of project:

- Level 1: Project is noncontroversial, causes negligible accessibility impacts and causes minimal traffic disruption.

- Level 2: Project has general public acceptance, little impact on accessibility or traffic, and a moderate degree of traffic disruption. Examples include urban resurfacing, bridge repair projects and other construction activities that may require lane closures.

- Level 3: Project may be controversial, will significantly impact traffic flow or will significantly affect accessibility to properties (temporarily or permanently). Examples are parking removal, median openings/closures, access management issues, traffic signal removal, roadway widening, major reconstruction and projects including detours.

- Level 4: Project involves interstate work, including maintenance work, road widening, temporary ramp closures, constructing a new interchange and major reconstruction. Also included are projects that require temporary closure (i.e., for the duration of the construction or maintenance work) or permanent total closure of the roadway, bridges and railroad crossings.

This section of the handbook continues with a discussion of the activities expected to occur during the design phase under each CAP level and the format and content of each CAP report.

Differing levels of effort and responsibility for community engagement are also addressed in connection with alternative project delivery. *From 3.5 Public Involvement During Alternative Project Delivery* (beginning on page 24 of the handbook, page 32 of the PDF):

As part of the RFP [request for proposal] package, a preliminary CAP should be developed to provide the competing design-build teams an understanding of the community engagement level of effort before bids are submitted.

Some projects are large enough that the [d]epartment may elect to hire a separate Public Involvement Consultant (PIC) to represent the [d]epartment as a [c]ommunications [m]anager. Not all projects warrant the need for a PIC.

Related Resource:

Community Awareness Plan Template, Florida Department of Transportation, undated. https://fdotwww.blob.core.windows.net/sitefinity/docs/default-source/designsupport/districts/d4/kbfiles/community-awareness-plan-(cap)-template---updated-may-2024.docx?sfvrsn=76afca6e_1

Georgia

Public Involvement Plan for Georgia DOT Projects, Georgia Department of Transportation, 2021. https://www.dot.ga.gov/PartnerSmart/DesignManuals/Environmental/Public%20Involvement%20Plan/PublicInvolvementPlan.pdf
Chapter 3, From Project Initiation Through Completion, Operations and Maintenance (which begins on page 10 of the plan, page 12 of the PDF), addresses the points during the project development process at which the agency will engage with the public:

There are many points along the Georgia DOT Plan Development Process (PDP) when members of [p]roject [t]eams have the opportunity — and more importantly, the responsibility — to engage the public and/or key project stakeholders. While we at Georgia DOT understand how proposed transportation projects will benefit a community, a city, region or even the state, nearby residents and businesses may not fully understand or agree with the benefit of the end result.

When the project's complexity, longevity or public interest warrants, each member of the Georgia DOT [p]roject [t]eam should seek out, encourage and facilitate public input/engagement opportunities early and often. Each project has its own set of unique public involvement and outreach opportunities and challenges during each phase of project development. For example, public outreach may not be necessary during [the] design phase for an intersection improvement in a low-traffic location; however, once that project moves to construction, traffic control impacts may warrant some outreach to local businesses, residents, schools and community resources.

It is important to note that not all projects, including major projects (as defined by the PDP), carry negative connotations for the public. Project teams should be as aware of projects that have strong public support as they are of those that are negatively perceived by the public.

From page 42 of the plan (page 44 of the PDF):

5.4 Assess and Secure Public Involvement Resource Needs
Fairly early in the scoping process, the [p]roject [t]eam may have been able to foresee the extent of the public involvement activities needed for the proposed project. Beyond consideration of the project as a CE [categorical exclusion], EA [environmental assessment] or EIS [environmental impact study], the particular dynamics of either the range of alternatives to address the project purpose and need, design, project location or stakeholder interest will likely determine the level of public involvement needed.

Here are some general descriptions of the resources needed for different levels of outreach:

1. Project Team Resources

Traditional meetings with local government officials; holding one or two PIOHs [public information open houses] (and all related logistics); compiling and providing responses to public comments, phone calls and emails; and series of press releases to local media outlets announcing PIOH, public comment period, project letting, construction traffic interruptions and completion.

2. Enhanced Project Team Resources with Stand-Alone PI Plan

Early focus on messaging need and purpose and safety and/or mobility benefits; graphics or animation to compare existing and future traffic flow and volumes; traditional meetings with local government officials; holding one or two PIOHs (and all related logistics); meetings with area homeowners' associations, PTA [Parent Teacher Association] and CID [community improvement district]; outreach to local transit providers; project web page content development; compilation of database for several email updates through project development; compiling and providing responses to public comments, phone calls and emails; and series of press releases to local media outlets announcing PIOH, public comment period, project letting, construction traffic interruptions and completion.

3. Consultant Resources with Stand-Alone PI Plan

Early focus on messaging need and purpose and safety and/or mobility benefits; produce video or animation to compare existing and future traffic flow and volumes; traditional meetings with local government officials; holding one or two PIOHs (and all related logistics); meetings with area homeowners' associations, CID and several key stakeholder groups; outreach to local transit providers; project web page content development; compilation of extensive database for several email updates to all stakeholders through project development; design and distribution of project e-newsletters; compiling and providing responses to public comments, phone calls and emails; and series of press releases to local media outlets announcing PIOH, public comment period, project letting, construction traffic interruptions and completion.

Hawaii

Public Participation Plan, Oahu Metropolitan Planning Organization, 2022.
https://oahumpo.org/?wpfb_dl=2528
From the introduction:

The purpose of this Public Participation Plan (PPP) is to outline how the public can get involved in OahuMPO's planning processes. This PPP also reflects how the OahuMPO is responding to federal requirements for a proactive public involvement process.

From page 24 of the plan (page 28 of the PDF):

Step 3. Pick the Appropriate Level of Involvement
What does public involvement need to accomplish? What is reasonable, given the timing and available resources? Members of the public and stakeholder groups will not be expected to have the same levels of engagement and understanding of transportation planning. The public involved will be knowledgeable about the transportation planning process. These individuals and entities actively participate and have reasonably extensive knowledge of Oʻahu's transportation issues and policy. The representatives of CAC [citizen advisory committee] member organizations who regularly attend

CAC meetings are expected to understand transportation planning issues more than the general public. The informed public will have some understanding of the issues but will not be familiar with the OahuMPO's role in the regional planning process. The interested public, aka the general public, [has] an inherent interest in transportation challenges but will possess little direct knowledge of policy issues. The most knowledgeable will be fewer but are most engaged. The least knowledgeable will be great in number but are least involved.

New Jersey

Capital Project Procedures: Public Involvement Action Plan, New Jersey Department of Transportation, last updated 2020.
https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-element-cse&cx=f1a222ae9af1a47bb&q=https://nj.gov/transportation/eng/documents/piap/piap.shtm&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwiZ7K2kl_aMAxUmE1kFHcjxIjoQFnoECAEQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3Fc3YPPROJxufAZkHZWME0
This guidance includes a description of the *Level of Public Involvement During New Project Development*, which identifies four phases: concept development, scope development, design and construction. For each phase, the purpose and public outreach activities are provided for basic and major/complex studies.

Oregon

Equitable Community Engagement Guide: 2020-2023, Oregon Department of Transportation, undated.
https://www.oregon.gov/odot/equity/HB2985/Equitable%20Community%20Engagement%20Guide.pdf
The goal of this interactive online guide is "to identify community assets and offer transparency throughout an engagement effort." Agency staff members are directed to "complete as much information as an individual or as a small team before contacting and/or sharing this information with partners, including but not limited to contractors, consultants, interagency partners, stakeholders or anyone [who] is not involved [in] initial research and plannings, etc." This ensures that "the project team has clarified, entered and verified as much information as possible prior to addressing gaps, barrier[s] or opportunities with partners."

Worksheet 4: Determine Level of Engagement, which appears on page 4 of the guide (page 6 of the PDF), is completed in conjunction with selected community leaders to:
- Create a timeline for when each level of engagement will be implemented.
- Communicate the anticipated value to community members prior to, during and after completion of the project/program.

Contacts

CTC engaged with the individuals below to gather information for this investigation.

State Agencies

Idaho

Megan Jahns
Senior Public Information Officer
Idaho Transportation Department
208-772-1295, megan.jahns@itd.idaho.gov

North Carolina

Jamille Robbins
Group Leader, Public Involvement, Community Studies and Visualization
North Carolina Department of Transportation
919-707-6085, jarobbins@ncdot.gov

Texas

Julie Beaubien
Team Lead, Public Involvement Section
Texas Department of Transportation
512-739-7930, julie.beaubien@txdot.gov

Appendix A: Survey Questions

The online survey represented below was distributed via email to the member list of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Committee on Transportation Communications, selected member cities of the National Association of City Transportation Officials, selected transit agencies and other potential respondents.

Caltrans Survey on Determining the Timing and Scope of Public Engagement
The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is gathering information about community engagement activities in transportation project planning, **before or in addition to** when outreach would be required under the federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) or similar state statute.

The survey below inquires about the timing and extent of the community engagement your agency conducts outside of federally mandated outreach. Please keep in mind these key concepts as you complete the survey:

- Caltrans is seeking information about how agencies determine **when** to engage the community and the **level** of that engagement. Examining the efficacy of the various methods used for community engagement is outside the scope of this survey.

- The survey examines engagement at the **project level,** not from a broader planning or programmatic perspective.

We estimate the survey will take 25 minutes to complete. We would appreciate receiving your responses by [**multiple dates**].

If someone else in your agency would be more appropriate to address questions related to this issue, please forward this survey to that person.

The final report for this project, which will include a summary of the responses received from all survey participants, will be available on the Caltrans website.

If you have questions about completing the survey, please contact Susan Johnson at susan.johnson@ctcandassociates.com. If you have questions about Caltrans' interest in this issue, please contact Tori Kanzler at tori.kanzler@dot.ca.gov.

Thank you in advance for your participation!

(Required) Please provide your contact information.

Name:
Agency:
Division/Title:
Email Address:
Phone Number:

Note: Responses to the question below determined how respondents were directed through the survey.

(Required) Has your agency implemented, or considered implementing, community engagement practices for transportation projects beyond what is required by the federal NEPA or your state equivalent?

- Yes (Directed the respondent to **Conducting Community Engagement** and the remaining question sets.)
- No (Directed the respondent to **Wrap-Up**.)

Conducting Community Engagement

Before You Begin: For the questions below, "community engagement" refers to outreach efforts with partners, tribes, stakeholders and the general public **before or in addition to** the public outreach required by NEPA or your state equivalent.

1. From among those listed below, please briefly describe the project characteristics that trigger, and help prioritize, the community engagement conducted by your agency.

   Demographics:
   Project location:
   Community interest:
   Potential business/economic impact:
   Environmental impact:
   Traffic impact:

   Historical context:
   Equity focus:
   Project budget:
   Project aesthetics:
   Other (Please describe.)

2. Please describe any factors or considerations, other than the project characteristics listed above, that your agency uses to identify and prioritize transportation projects for community engagement.

3. (Required) Does your agency use criteria matrices, flowcharts, checklists or other processes to aid staff in determining the timing and level of community engagement for transportation projects?
   - No
   - Yes (Please provide a link to publications that present the matrices, flowcharts, checklists or other tools your agency uses. You may also send any relevant materials to susan.johnson@ctcandassociates.com.)

4. Does your agency have additional or unique considerations or requirements for engaging with tribal communities?
   - No
   - Yes (Please describe the considerations or requirements for engaging with tribal communities.)

5. Are there circumstances under which your agency does not consider conducting community engagement? This might involve specific project types, such as maintenance or emergency projects, or instances in which there is no opportunity for project change.
   - No
   - Yes (Please describe the project types or circumstances under which your agency does not pursue community engagement.)

Timing the Community Engagement

Community engagement can occur at multiple points in the project development process. Please identify the types of transportation products and projects most likely to spur some degree of community engagement — in addition to that required by NEPA or your state equivalent — at the six phases of project development described below.

Phase 1: Early planning phase. Statement of the proposed project's purpose and need.

Types of plans, products and projects:

Phase 2: Project development phase. Before project approval, the project manager begins preparing a project work plan focused on project initiation.

Types of products and projects:

Phase 3: Project approval and environmental review. Includes a constructability review that assures that all alternatives and the proposed preferred alternative are constructible on the available level of detail.

Types of products and projects:

Phase 4: Plans, specifications and estimates (PS&E). Project design activities that begin after the preferred alternative has been chosen and the project has been approved.

Types of products and projects:

Phase 5: Construction. Contract approval authorizes construction of the project. The project is constructed and the contract is administered according to the PS&E that was developed by the project engineer.

Types of products and projects:

Phase 6: Post-construction and maintenance. Includes final inspections, traffic monitoring, community feedback and collaboration with stakeholders.

Types of products and projects:

6. Please provide any additional comments about agency practices for determining the **timing** of community engagement beyond what is required for NEPA or your state equivalent.

Determining the Level of Engagement

Determining when to engage is only one element of a community engagement practice. The **level of engagement** also varies by the type of transportation project.

The International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2's) [Spectrum of Public Participation](#) defines five levels — from lowest to highest — of community engagement. Please use the IAP2 levels of engagement, briefly described below, to provide examples of the transportation project types, activities and tools that your agency considers for each level of engagement.

Level 1: Inform. Provide the public with balanced and objective information.

Examples: Fact sheets, social media posts, informational presentations.

Project types:

Activities and tools:

Level 2: Consult. Obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

Examples: Public comment, surveys, open houses.

Project types:

Activities and tools:

Level 3: Involve. Work directly with the public to ensure concerns are consistently understood and considered.

Examples: Interactive workshops, community forums, interactive websites.

    Project types:

    Activities and tools:

Level 4: Collaborate. Partner with the public in each aspect of decision-making, including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solution.

Examples: Stakeholder advisory committees, memoranda of understanding with community-based organizations, collaborative decision-making.

    Project types:

    Activities and tools:

Level 5: Empower. Place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

Examples: Community-driven planning, consensus building, participatory budgeting.

    Project types:

    Activities and tools:

1. Please provide any additional comments about agency practices for determining the **level** of community engagement beyond what is required for NEPA or your state equivalent.

Administering Community Engagement

1. How does your agency fund the community engagement efforts conducted in addition to those required by NEPA?
2. Does the early engagement funding source depend on the stage of the project?
   - No
   - Yes (Please describe engagement funding sources at different points in the project development process.)

(Required) 3. Does your agency use consultants to conduct community engagement?
   - No (Directed respondent to **Assessment**.)
   - Yes (Directed respondent to **Using Consultants for Community Engagement**.)

Using Consultants for Community Engagement

1. Please describe the consultant role in community engagement.
2. How long has your agency been contracting out community engagement activities?
3. What are your agency's reasons for using community engagement consultants?
4. Please provide any available cost information for community engagement consultants.
5. What are the benefits of using consultants for community engagement?
6. What are the challenges of using consultants for community engagement?

Assessment

1. Please describe any barriers or challenges your agency has encountered when determining the timing and level of community engagement for transportation projects.

2. What are your top three recommendations for another agency establishing guidelines for the timing and level of community engagement?

    Recommendation 1:

    Recommendation 2:

    Recommendation 3:

3. Please provide links to documents — other than those you've already provided — that describe your agency's process to determine community engagement for transportation projects. You may also send any relevant materials to susan.johnson@ctcandassociates.com.

Wrap-Up

Please use this space to provide any comments or additional information about your previous responses.