

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT



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INTRODUCTION

Public participation and involvement is an integral part of today's transportation planning and project development process.

Public involvement and public input are important parts of the Texas Department of Transportation's (TxDOT) mission: "Through collaboration and leadership, we deliver a safe, reliable, and integrated transportation system that enables the movement of people and goods." The public expects TxDOT to do the right thing at the right time in the right way by including communities and their residents in all phases of our projects from transportation planning and project development through construction. Engaging the public is the essence of public service and the foundation of TxDOT's values of people, accountability, trust and honesty.



TxDOT PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT POLICY

In July 2011, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 1420 (SB 1420), requiring TxDOT to develop and implement a policy that guides and encourages public involvement. SB 1420 also requires the policy to include specific elements, such as using techniques that target different groups and individuals, making efforts to clearly tie public involvement to TxDOT decisions and encouraging continuous contact between TxDOT and its stakeholders throughout the decision-making process.

TxDOT's Public Involvement Policy includes eight key objectives to more effectively involve the public. These objectives include:

- Ensure continued adherence to all regulatory guidelines and policies in compliance with federal and state law and sound public involvement practice;
- Solicit and encourage proactive public involvement that can be fully integrated into the planning process and incorporated in the various planning activities;
- Provide opportunities for accurate and timely information on which Texas residents can rely;
- Establish and maintain TxDOT's reputation as a trusted source of information;
- Proactively seek early and continuing public input and involvement and be responsive to inquiries and suggestions;
- Listen to stakeholders when comments are provided and be responsive and accountable to all stakeholders;
- Energetically adhere to or exceed all applicable TxDOT, state and federal public participation requirements for planning and project implementation; and
- Use multiple methods to explain TxDOT's processes, priorities and procedures so that the public will have a solid foundation on which to make requests, inquire and suggestions.

Importance of Involving the Public

Though public involvement is not required in some steps of the transportation project development process, involving the public early and often is important in establishing open lines of communication – critical to building trust and credibility - between TxDOT and the public. Public input and comments are a valuable part of TxDOT's project development process because these comments lead to building better transportation projects for a community, improved project planning and development and a more transparent decision-making process. TxDOT reviews and considers all comments from the public in the decision making process and when feasible, uses the public's input in the final decisions. TxDOT also communicates to the public when and how decisions reflect public input.

TxDOT PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT SECTION

TxDOT created its Office of Public Involvement in April 2012 as a result of the Texas Sunset Advisory Commission and legislative recommendations that TxDOT have more deliberate and meaningful public involvement processes. That office has since been rolled into the Transportation Planning and Programming division to better align with the project development process. Public involvement staff provides support to TxDOT districts in public involvement and community outreach planning and implementation. Each of TxDOT's 25 districts has a public involvement liaison responsible for guiding districts in the development of public involvement plans and assisting with the related strategies and tactics that includes stakeholder assessments, issue identification and prioritization and planning for working group and public meetings and hearings.

In addition to public involvement planning and guidance, public involvement staff also develops material for outreach efforts. Because transportation project development can take decades, the process is flexible regarding when specific public outreach tools are used and meetings are held. Some of the most commonly used include public meetings and hearings as well as open house-style meetings. During the formal environmental study stage, public meetings and open houses are frequently used to gather public feedback and talk with the community about proposed project details. Often the environmental study process concludes with a public hearing that includes a formal presentation.

Public hearings offer the public an opportunity to provide formal input on their preferred alternative at the end of the formal public involvement stage of the environmental process. TxDOT's hearing process notifies the public that TxDOT does not respond to questions and comments from the public at formal project hearings. Instead, TxDOT takes detailed notes of all input provided and then crafts responses that later become a part of the formal written record of the environmental study.

The various meeting types can be used early in the process to gather community input about their transportation needs and concerns. In many communities, one of the most effective approaches early in the process is through smaller, stakeholder working group meetings to identify and prioritize issues before vetting with the general public.

Public meetings and open houses are also used in the construction and maintenance stages to inform the public about project details, lane closures and traffic control plans. Because the project development process is flexible and each community has a unique set of needs, public involvement staff works with local TxDOT offices to decide on the most appropriate outreach tools and meeting types to best gather public feedback and provide convenient public participation opportunities.

Public Involvement Challenges

Involving the community includes challenges for the public and TxDOT. For the public, personal involvement takes time and effort, and working within a unfamiliar process sometimes requires patience. Also, communicating issues and concerns within a technical, engineering- focused process can be confusing and frustrating. For TxDOT it can be challenging to communicate complex, technical transportation concepts and terms. Transportation planning and development is often a long-term endeavor, and the public is typically more inclined to participate in shorter-term, more immediate projects.



Public Outreach Efforts

Recognizing the challenges of involving the public in the transportation planning process, TxDOT has made efforts to change its organizational approach to public involvement by opening lines of communication between the community and TxDOT and involving the community early and often in the transportation decision-making process.

TxDOT knows that the public expects TxDOT to continually update and modernize outreach efforts to both inform and involve the public. Online communications that encourage the public to sign up for project email updates and the use of quick response codes to scan for quick access to information from mobile devices is an effective tool – as are online surveys, virtual public meetings and video presentations. TxDOT has sought to make public involvement more convenient by providing online open houses and posting meeting materials on TxDOT's website so the public can view project information and provide comments at their convenience. For some projects, online public participation and comments are greater than in-person meetings. Innovative, 3D visualization of proposed projects is another effective approach to addressing the challenge of communicating complex, technical transportation concepts.

TxDOT has researched and established best practices on the most effective methods to engage and involve the public. TxDOT has developed public involvement templates for informational materials so the public is receiving more consistent and thorough information. Additionally, TxDOT provides translation services such as translating public meeting and outreach materials when appropriate. To better meet the needs of non-English speaking populations TxDOT strives to continually adapt to the rapidly changing demographics of the state and anticipate what future generations will expect in terms of information and access to the decision-making process. TxDOT will also continue to develop statewide best practices in public involvement and use public input to improve transportation projects.



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

VALUES:

People

People are the Department's most important customer, asset, and resource. The well-being, safety, and quality of life for Texans and the traveling public are of the utmost concern to the Department. We focus on relationship building, customer service, and partnerships.

Accountability

We accept responsibility for our actions and promote open communication and transparency at all times.

Trust

We strive to earn and maintain confidence through reliable and ethical decision-making.

Honesty

We conduct ourselves with the highest degree of integrity, respect, and truthfulness.

VISION:

A forward-thinking leader delivering mobility, enabling economic opportunity, and enhancing quality of life for all Texans.

MISSION:

Through collaboration and leadership, we deliver a safe, reliable, and integrated transportation system that enables the movement of people and goods.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

- **Deliver the Right Projects** – Implement effective planning and forecasting processes that deliver the right projects on-time and on-budget.
- **Focus on the Customer** – People are at the center of everything we do.
- **Foster Stewardship** – Ensure efficient use of state resources.
- **Optimize System Performance** – Develop and operate an integrated transportation system that provides reliable and accessible mobility, and enables economic growth.
- **Preserve our Assets** – Deliver preventive maintenance for TxDOT's system and capital assets to protect our investments.
- **Promote Safety** – Champion a culture of safety.
- **Value our Employees** – Respect and care for the well-being and development of our employees.