Strategic Public Engagement Guidance

Texas Department of Transportation's Statewide Approach

This guidance is directed to TxDOT staff and consultant audiences.

Texas Department of Transportation

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ONE
Introduction

> **“Provide comprehensive and accurate descriptions of the project in advance, along with parameters of the input desired.”**
> – Community survey participant

01 Introduction

To continue enhancing TxDOT’s public involvement processes and best practices, the Transportation, Planning and Programming Division Public Involvement Section (TPP PI Section), is pleased to present the Strategic Public Engagement Guidance document (the guidance). This document is the direct result of a TxDOT Administration-approved initiative that helps ensure we have the best and most consistent plan for including all populations that comprise Texas.

Source and importance of this guidance

As directed by the Texas Transportation Commission, TxDOT’s Public Involvement Policy was adopted by the Texas Transportation Commission on Jan. 27, 2011 with Minute Order 112555. It states:

> *The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) commits to purposefully involve the public in planning and project implementation by providing for early, continuous, transparent and effective access to information and decision-making processes. TxDOT will regularly update public involvement methods to include best practices in public involvement and incorporate a range of strategies to encourage broad participation reflective of the needs of the state’s population.*

In addition, eight objectives were included with the adoption of the policy 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, inquires and suggestions.

The public involvement process helps TxDOT better understand the needs, expectations, and aspirations of the affected communities to ultimately improve transportation projects. This process empowers communities to connect with TxDOT and in turn, allows TxDOT to effectively share information and receive feedback, which helps the Agency deliver critical projects and initiatives. Engaging the public during major milestones throughout a project life cycle creates efficiencies by proactively managing public involvement risks that are costly and time-consuming when they occur at later stages in project development.

From a federal perspective, public involvement requires thoughtful and intentional planning. As stated in USDOT's *Promising Practices for Meaningful Public Involvement in Transportation Decision-Making Guide,* "Meaningful public involvement early in the planning process that includes full representation from all communities affected is key to successful project delivery. Equitable access to public involvement opportunities ensures that underserved and overburdened populations are included. This is vital to informing project delivery, including NEPA's requirement to review and consider effects for environmental justice communities."

Use of this guidance

This statewide guidance directs TxDOT staff and consultants to techniques and tools to ensure robust, strategic and intentional public engagement with all interested stakeholders. The guidance also focuses on specific strategies for increasing engagement with those populations that are traditionally harder to reach on a consistent basis – Texas' largest minority populations, people with disabilities, and Environmental Justice (EJ) communities. Public engagement conducted strategically allows TxDOT to hear from more voices – not just the loudest in the room – and gain a balanced representation of the communities' perspectives. This research-backed guidance is not just a reference document; the PI Section will work with districts, divisions, and consultants to implement these strategies on an ongoing basis.

Development of recommendations within guidance

The most exciting aspect of this guidance is that it is based on solid research and provides credible direction based on a variety of sources. To prepare this guidance document, the TPP PI Section sourced best practices, feedback and resources from within TxDOT, from community members across the state of Texas, and from peer agencies around the nation. The graphic below summarizes the research components to produce this guidance, unique among TxDOT's peers.

Next steps

This guidance will evolve over time to ensure TxDOT continues to support effective approaches for broad engagement. The PI Section will collaborate and work with Agency staff and consultants to implement this guidance document.

How to use this document:

The chapters of this guidance function chronologically to guide the planning and development process for a public outreach event or engagement.

The guidance in this document can be applied to a project or study in any phase of development, whether short or long term, from feasibility through construction. It is designed to be used by TxDOT districts, divisions and consultant teams on transportation projects and initiatives.

Key Research Finding:

Key research findings are included throughout this guidance to indicate how our community and peer survey research influenced content.

Look for Key Research Findings throughout the document.

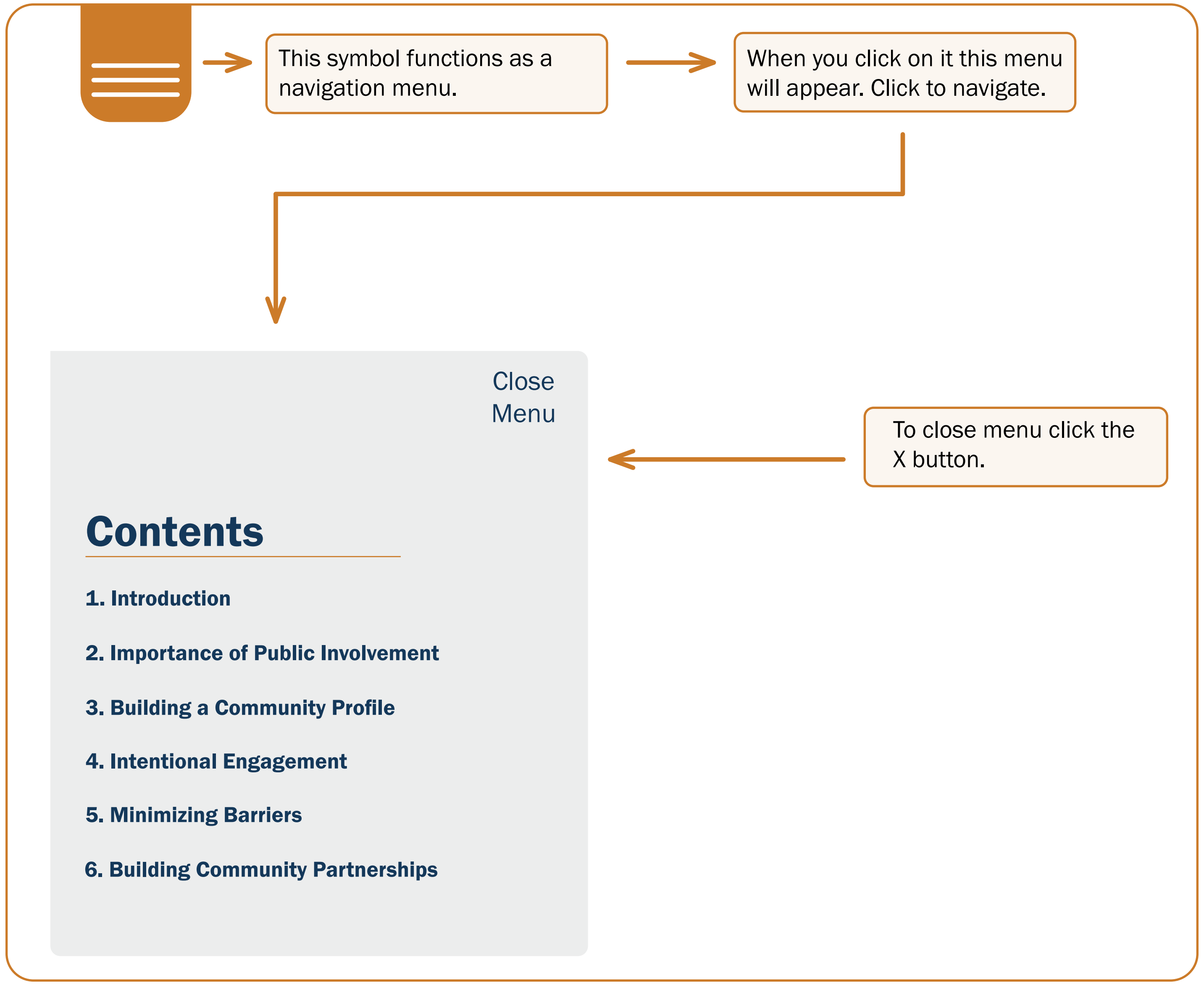
Take Action

This symbol indicates the start of action steps.

As applicable, key recommendations are identified at the end of each chapter; reference these for a quick summary.

Key recommendations from this chapter:

01	02



Action Overview

Chapter 2

Review the contents of Chapter 2 for an overall refresher on the role of public involvement in our communities and for help messaging that role to the communities we serve. See included public-facing one-pager for ideas on how to help the community understand their role in public involvement and to better understand TxDOT's commitment to public involvement.

Chapter 3

The first step in outreach planning is understanding your audience. Use Chapter 3 to guide development of a community profile. Complete this step during project initiation and revisit at each public involvement milestone.

Chapter 4-6

Once your community profile is complete, reference Chapter 4 for a thorough, step-by-step checklist to plan and execute your public engagement. Use this guidance to plan each public involvement milestone. Review its references to Chapters 5 and 6 for additional considerations throughout the planning process. Where applicable, links to additional detailed information and resources are provided throughout Chapter 5.

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. TxDOT's guidance should be applied to go above-and-beyond legally required public involvement activities.

TWO

Understanding the Importance of Public Involvement

"Ensure project significance and need for impactful input is communicated so folks can prioritize making time for it versus wasting time on an issue they can't impact or don't see as an issue."

– Community survey participant

02 Understanding the Importance of Public Involvement

Strategic and effective public involvement is key for TxDOT, now more than ever. TxDOT's 10-year plan continues to grow and has reached a record-breaking $100B volume of transportation projects identified to enhance safety, improve congestion and connectivity, and preserve Texas roadways. Effective public involvement is critical to deliver these projects, on time and on budget. The public is an important decision maker as we gather feedback from the community and consider their opinions and concerns as we plan and implement transportation projects. By involving the public, we can better understand the transportation needs of the community and work to develop transportation solutions that are responsive to those needs.*

Public involvement provides stakeholders (those who have an interest in an issue, such as individuals, representatives, interest groups and communities) the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives. Overall, the role of public involvement is to ensure that transportation projects are developed and implemented in a manner that balances the needs of the community with the goals of the transportation system. Through ongoing engagement with the public, we can create better transportation solutions that benefit all Texans.

Bringing focus to engagement with the many diverse communities across the state

Equity in public involvement helps TxDOT ensure that all communities have an opportunity to contribute to transportation decisions that affect their lives, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, physical ability, and other factors. Engaging the many diverse communities across the state is especially important to ensure the diversity of thoughts and opinions are fully captured in the decision-making process.

Additionally, including these communities is vital for effective planning outcomes as they are often the most impacted by transportation decisions. For example, low-income communities may have limited access to personal vehicles or public transportation, which can make it difficult to access jobs, healthcare and other essential services.

Engaging a diversity of community members in the decision-making process helps to minimize impacts on residents and community resources from transportation projects by building trust and fostering better relationships between TxDOT and the communities we serve. By demonstrating a commitment to listening to and addressing the concerns of these communities, transportation agencies can build stronger partnerships that lead to more effective transportation solutions.

These are just a few reasons that this guidance is focused on equipping TxDOT with best practices for engaging the many diverse communities across the state. By listening to and addressing the concerns of these communities, TxDOT can create a more sustainable and effective transportation system. As we address barriers to public participation, we also begin to understand barriers to delivering roadway projects. This guide directs recommended best practices for Agency staff and consultants to use to ensure project delivery as public input informs the decision-making process.

Communicating the role and value of public involvement in your community

Community members may not understand the value of public involvement because they simply have not historically been asked for their opinions or have felt that their opinions were not valued. Additionally, there are many countries where opportunities to interact with government officials on projects are limited. Community members unfamiliar with the U.S. transportation system may require education on public involvement as a feature of TxDOT's decision-making process before being able to meaningfully engage with us.

The TxDOT PI Section has provided one-page customizable flyer options in English and Spanish, designed to help bridge this gap. These flyer options could provide the public a better understanding of their role in TxDOT's project development process.

*https://www.txdot.gov/about/newsroom/stories/txdot-announces-record-transportation-investment.html

THREE
Building a Community Profile

“Explain what is needed and why, planned and why, expected of me and why, all in understandable conversational language.”

– Community survey participant

03 Building a Community Profile

Texas’ population encompasses people of all ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, languages, abilities and life circumstances. The makeup of a community’s residents can vary greatly and groups that make up even a small percentage of the state’s population can be present in great numbers in specific locations. Given changing demographics and without research in advance of project outreach, it can be difficult to anticipate the groups that might require particular focus or accommodation.

There are many tools and techniques available to help TxDOT staff and consultants learn more about the people living near a project area. This document identifies several of these methods and discusses the next steps in putting this information into action. As each method has both its advantages and disadvantages, it is important to consider a combination of two or more to help ensure a comprehensive assessment.

Key Research Finding:

TxDOT’s survey of peer agencies indicated that almost all responding agencies use population demographics of the study/project area to identify the community groups that are present. The most common data sources cited included the U.S. Census Bureau, the Environmental Protection Agency EJScreen tool, and data from local or regional planning agencies.

Data Sources

Start Here

TxDOT developed a data tool to aid in the development of your community profile. Use it first; other tools from the next table can be used to supplement analysis.

TxDOT’s Census Data Tool provides census data sets necessary to complete a Community Impacts Assessment for TxDOT. This includes data on race/ethnicity, language, education level, income and more.

Access the Census Data Tool

Internal to TxDOT

Data Sources

Resources	Advantages	Disadvantages
National Reporting		
U.S. Census Bureau Data Portal – Comprehensive data on race, ethnicity, language, age, income, education, employment and much more. Visit *https://www.census.gov/data.html* **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) EJ Screen Tool –** Data gathering tool for a variety of common EJ population metrics across a range of geography types, including GIS shapefiles. Visit *https://www.epa.gov/ejscreen* **U.S. DOT Justice40 ETC Explorer Tool - Interactive Web –** Application that uses 2020 census tracts and data to explore the cumulative burden communities experience as a result of underinvestment in transportation in five components. Visit: *https://www.transportation.gov/priorities/equity/justice40/etc-explorer* **Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) CPD Maps Tool –** Data mapping tool for a variety of demographics, housing and employment information. Visit: *https://egis.hud.gov/cpdmaps/* **American Community Survey (ACS) Narrative Profiles -** Detailed profiles feature information by county, including detailed data about the level of computer and internet use. Visit: *https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/narrative-profiles/* **FHWA's Screening Tool for Equity Analysis of Projects -** Extension of FHWA's HEPGIS web application that provides rapid screening of potential project locations anywhere in the United States to support Title VI, environment justice (EJ) and other socioeconomic data analyses. Visit: https://maps.dot.gov/fhwa/steap/	• Frequently updated nationwide information • Consistent comparison resource across geographies (such as comparing local and statewide data) • Recognized and trusted information	• Tools require some time to interpret at first • Needed data might not be available at required geographic area or level • Data is not always specific (grouping languages together, for instance)
Local Reporting		
Texas Education Agency (TEA) School Report Cards and Other District Reports – Report cards for nearby schools and other available information can be used to collect data on ethnicity and other demographic information. Visit *https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/school-report-cards* **Local Planning Documents –** Comprehensive plans and other reports prepared by city governments, MPOs or other local agencies can contain demographic data, occasionally with additional local context.	• Report cards for nearby schools and other available information can be used to collect data on ethnicity, languages other than English spoken in the area, socioeconomic status and other demographic information • Can provide quality data on a neighborhood level • Information is reliable and easily found online • May contain further analysis beyond what the data alone provides	• Data is not always specific Some sources may cover too broad of a geography • Reporting focused on students only, leaving out households with no school-age children

Resources	Advantages	Disadvantages
Experience and Expertise		
Past Public Involvement Efforts – Review past public involvement plans and materials; consult with district teams, other agencies or consultants who are familiar with the project area. **Partners and Stakeholders –** Consult neighborhood leaders, chambers of commerce, faith-based organizations, and non-profit organizations about the needs of their constituents or data they may have available. This can be done through one-on-one interviews, focus groups or online surveys.	• Those who work with the community can provide information with vital context and details that summary data cannot • Identify specific neighborhoods where diverse populations live and work and help you learn from past mistakes and successes	• Consider the information provided - information may be limited or biased • Information may require additional research to understand the identified needs • Consider effectiveness of past public involvement efforts
Local Resources		
Cultural and Religious Organizations – Cultural and religious organizations that represent specific populations identified in the area. **Public Events and Programs –** Public events and health/social programs for populations of a specific cultural/religious identity or for those of particular ages, socioeconomic statuses or people with disabilities. Attend community events like town halls or local festivals to help identify local populations. **Specialty Businesses –** Grocery stores, restaurants and other businesses that cater to specific ethnic or religious groups. This can be done through corridor drives and desktop research. **Local Media –** The presence of local media in languages other than English can indicate the demographics of a community. Additionally, local media outlets may have reported on recent demographic trends or conducted interviews with residents that provide insights into the characteristics of the community.	• Can indicate trends and populations that are poorly represented in data • Often led or managed by people with local knowledge and context • Can also become a valuable partner in resulting outreach efforts	• May not be specific to surrounding area or serve a local population • May still require other research to understand extent of need

Goals and Thresholds

Once data is collected, the next step is applying it to your public involvement planning process. As part of that next step, an important question remains: How many people of a specific group constitutes a significant need for specific outreach and accommodation? Unfortunately, there is no single right answer.

Key Research Finding:

TxDOT's survey of peer agencies yielded varying thresholds and determinations such as 5 or 10% of a local population, and/or a thousand people, or approach the need on a case-by-case basis with the available data using staff experience and expertise.

Next Steps

Key questions that must be answered during initial planning for outreach activities include:

Who is potentially most impacted by a project?

Depending on the design and location of a project and the specifics of its outcome, different groups might be affected by a project more than others. If members of a particular community might face greater impacts than the general public, you may want to ensure engagement with them even if they don't account for a substantial portion of the population.

Does the data accurately reflect the community today?

Be mindful of the age and specificity of the data being used. Old data might not reflect recent changes and growth in a community. Data that covers areas much larger than your project may fail to reflect clustering of a group in specific communities.

Consider visiting the area to confirm data. Physical markers like business names or signs in languages other than English can provide important insight into the local community.

What resources do you have for outreach and accommodation?

Many solutions require minimal extra cost or resources and can be applied in any situation regardless of need, such as translating an overview fact sheet into a commonly used language. Partners and stakeholders may be able to assist in reaching and accommodating specific groups as well. Check out Chapter 6 for details on building community partnerships. TxDOT's Public Involvement Section can also provide access to additional resources; contact your assigned PI Section representative for help.

Key recommendations from this chapter:

01

At the beginning of every project or study, use TxDOT's Census DataTool, and supplemental resources as needed, to build a demographic-based community profile.

02

Revisit your profile with each public involvement phase to help determine activities and outreach strategy, regardless of the project size or phase of technical development.

03

During initial public involvement planning meetings at each outreach phase, review and discuss the key questions provided in this chapter to ensure your project's unique community is considered.

FOUR

Engaging with Intention

> “Explain in advance what it is that you need my help with. Make sure I understand what I am helping with. Make sure it is important enough for me to want to participate.”
>
> – Community survey participant

04 Engaging With Intention

Use this chapter as a step-by-step guide to plan and execute an entire phase of public engagement, from the very first brainstorming session to completing the summary and reflecting on what was heard. Every step combines instruction with advice for how to reach the full population of the community, as informed by research and surveys.

While time constraints and circumstances might necessitate not following each step in perfect order or might mean that certain considerations are not applicable to your project, consider this checklist as the recommended guide to generate ideas and to help ensure that nothing vital is being left out of engagement efforts. This guide also recognizes that not every project operates on the same scale or with the same resources; each step is written with that flexibility in mind and is designed to help prioritize what is vital for your project and what can be achieved within your means.

As you move through the chronological planning steps provided in this chapter, check the boxes provided to note completion.

☐ Step 1 – Define the Project and Community

Timing: Complete this activity concurrently with development of your project's Public Involvement Plan. Revisit to update and revise at the beginning of each PI phase of your project.

Objective: To establish consistent messaging on the project, determine what feedback is needed, and from whom we need to hear feedback.

- ☐ **Summarize the Project** – Within a few sentences, define what the project is, why it is being done, and what effects it might have on the community. This will form the core of your messaging to the community and is vital for convincing them to participate.
- ☐ **Define Engagement Goals** – Brainstorm both the list of topics that need to be discussed in engagement and the feedback that is needed from the community. In addition to project information, you need to be able to clearly articulate what the public's role is. Will you ask the public to review technical analysis and confirm findings or provide information that may be missing? Will you provide multiple solutions to an existing problem and ask the public to indicate their preference? Something else? It is important to identify the public's role and include this messaging in promotional materials for engagement opportunities. Be sure to include your Public Involvement Section contact for support and ideas.
- ☐ **Determine Focus Communities** – Determine the communities of focus for engagement. This will typically be those who live and work closest to the project area, but the nature of the project might expand this further (for example, riders of an affected transit system, or neighborhoods dependent on a major roadway). Who will be affected by this project?

☐ Step 2 – Build a Community Profile

Timing: Complete this activity concurrently with development of your project's Public Involvement Plan.

Objective: 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.

- ☐ **Collect Information** – Use the methods described in Chapter 3 to gather information on the focus communities identified in Step 1. Use multiple methods whenever possible to enhance the strengths of each method while minimizing their weaknesses.
- ☐ **Take Stock of What Was Learned** – Review the information and insights gathered to identify engagement targets: affected neighborhoods or towns, major employers or commercial areas, schools and other public resources, and the different demographic groups living and working in these areas.
- ☐ **Follow Up on Findings** – Conduct more research and discuss further with agency and community partners as needed to answer questions such as:
  - Are any areas particularly at risk for impacts?
  - Are there any past or current projects in these areas that might affect opinions?
  - Are different demographic groups clustered in specific neighborhoods or working in certain industries?

☐ Step 3 – Determine Involvement Needs

Timing: Initiate this activity concurrently with development of your project's Public Involvement Plan. Revisit to build out details as an initial step to planning an engagement, typically three months prior to when your engagement should begin.

Objective: Use the Community Profile to identify specific considerations that need to be accounted for when planning engagement opportunities and the promotion of those opportunities. See Chapter 5, sections 4-8 for tactics to minimize barriers for communities you identify in your project area.

- ☐ **Language Needs** – Your Community Profile (see Chapter 3 for more information on how to build a community profile) may show a potential need to accommodate non-English speakers. If this need is particularly substantial, identify the most common alternative languages and determine what translation and interpretation can be provided with the resources you have. Plan for what to do if accommodation requests are received for other languages. TxDOT has a Blanket Purchase Order that can support translation and interpretation needs.
- ☐ **Disability and Accessibility** – While you should always strive to maximize accessibility, your Community Profile may reveal an acute need for accommodating participants with disabilities. High rates of seniors in a community should prompt similar planning as well, as some may face mobility or sensory difficulties but not consider themselves disabled. See Chapter 5, sections 1-3 for tactics to reduce or eliminate barriers to participation for people with disabilities.
- ☐ **Other Communities to Consider** – Low-income individuals are often particularly time-constrained due to working longer hours or having less-flexible schedules; young families need to balance participation with work and childcare; racial, ethnic, and immigrant communities often have vital perspectives but may often feel distanced from public participation; transit-dependent populations are limited in where and when they can participate in person.
- ☐ **Controversial Projects and Histories** – Be aware of difficulties in outreach and engagement in past projects or previous phases of the current project. Identify which communities or demographics might be particularly sensitive to certain elements and impacts of the project. See Chapter 5, sections 5, 6, 9 and 10 for tactics to manage related common barriers to public involvement. Reach out to your assigned Public Involvement Section contact for additional support.

Step 4 – Plan Involvement Opportunities

Timing: Initiate this task two to three months prior to when your engagement should begin.

Objective: With knowledge of the input that is needed, who it should come from, and what considerations need to be accounted for, you can now design engagement opportunities to fit these factors. Think beyond traditional public meetings. There are many options for engagement. Work with your assigned Public Involvement Section contact for help in developing ideas.

- **Determine Types of Opportunities** – Considering the engagement needs of the community and the resources available, choose a range of involvement types to best achieve your goals. Use the table to the right for inspiration.
- **Choose Locations and Venues** – Select locations that are convenient to the public, including being reachable by transit and on foot/by bike where applicable. Consider non-traditional public involvement methods like pop-up or tabling engagement at community events, or holding public meetings in locations like malls, parks or community centers to leverage existing foot traffic. Verify accessibility for those with disabilities. See Chapter 5, sections 1 and 3 for more advice. If possible, obtain a floor plan of the venue space to plan layouts in advance.
- **Select Dates and Times** – Utilize a variety of times of day and days of week when possible to provide flexibility for participants; provide online engagement opportunities for those who cannot participate in person. Avoid events that go too late, especially after sunset, as transit availability becomes a concern and many prefer to not drive at night. **Be creative**; our survey showed that many are open to unconventional times, like Saturday events.
- **Plan for Needed Staffing** – Build a staffing plan for each opportunity. Provide sufficient technical staff to be able to answer questions quickly, even when events are busy. Non-technical staff can work sign-in and comment tables and help with logistical tasks and wayfinding. Plan for any materials translation needs, both from a schedule and staffing perspective. Also plan for any needed interpreters and translators (bilingual staff can greet and provide assistance, even if they're not comfortable explaining technical concepts) and any security needs.
- **Prepare Engagement Materials** – See Chapter 5, section 2 for resources on creating accessible materials that can be easily understood by the public. Leave adequate time for review, any needed translation, and adaptation into a variety of formats; anything presented in print should be available to the public online. If you have the resources, record videos of any presentations/open house exhibits to post online as well.

Key Research Finding:

Our peer agency survey participants described ensuring website compatibility with smartphones, keeping download sizes small, and designing your website with Section 508 compliance in mind as key strategies for engaging online. 508 Compliance is shorthand for the Section 508 Amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which requires federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. TxDOT team members should work with TxDOT's Creative Services to set up a project website to ensure compliance.

Engagement Opportunities

Public Meeting	Typically a presentation followed by time for participant questions and comments; some survey respondents reported valuing the chance to speak formally in front of a community audience.
Virtual Meeting	Follows similar format to a public meeting, but without the burden of travel and attendance.
Open House	Participants tour informational stations, speak with staff, and complete comment forms and activities. Flexible come-and-go format suits busy schedules.
Virtual Open House	Participants are guided through visually-driven documents and short videos on a website or other digital space and provide input through surveys and webforms.
Public Survey	Guide participants through a range of topics and informational content and collect input focused on your needs. Can be done in person, through the mail or online.
Focus Group, Stakeholder Meeting	Invite participants to hold small-group conversations with project staff. Present information, receive feedback, and explore the topics that spark the most interest.
Pop Up Engagement	Set up a table at public events or high-traffic areas in communities, provide brief information and visuals, and collect feedback with short surveys and activities.
Get Creative	After completing Steps 1-3, you know what you and your focus communities need from your engagement. Don't be afraid to try something new to meet those needs.

Step 5 – Plan and Implement Promotional Activities

Timing: Initiate this task two months prior to when your engagement should begin. Think beyond traditional newspaper advertisements - there are many ways to conduct promotional activities.

Objective: With engagement opportunities planned, you can now begin promoting the opportunities to the public, using what was learned about the community to inform these promotional activities. See Chapter 5, sections 9 and 10 for additional considerations on minimizing barriers through providing clarity in process and on the project.

- ☐ **Determine Types of Promotional Activities** – As resources allow, select a variety of promotional methods that best suit your focus communities. Redundancy is okay; never assume everyone will read your mailer or open to the right page of the newspaper to see your ad. Use the table on the next page for inspiration.
- ☐ **Prepare Promotional Materials** – Combine the project summary from Step 1 with information on scheduled engagement opportunities. Much like you need to be clear about what the project is and what it means for the public, be deliberate about naming and describing opportunities; participants need to have an accurate idea of what information will be covered and what they will be asked. Create materials to suit each form of promotion: what works as a poster doesn't necessarily work as a social media ad. Some districts pull from their district-specific PI templates to produce the noted promotional materials; other districts have leveraged the PI Section Materials Toolkit.

> **"Be specific and transparent about the data used to make decisions and how much public input factors into a decision."**
> – Community Survey Respondent

- ☐ **Collaborate with Partners** – Work with community leaders, faith-based organizations, media organizations, and other partners to promote your engagement. Build toolkits with promotional materials, fact sheets, and graphics for them to share directly or discuss with others. Remember: their audiences are valuable to them, and you need to earn their trust and convince them why this is worth the community's time and attention.
- ☐ **Plan to Collect Data** – Measure your outreach to evaluate later. Collect information on distribution, views and clicks from advertisers, social media and email campaigns. Track the totals of flyers distributed, mailers sent, phone calls made, etc. Include 'How did you hear about this event?' questions on sign-in sheets, registration pages, and other similar forms. Think about what data you want to track or improve and make a plan to measure those components.

Key Research Finding:

Lack of awareness was the top reason citied by community survey respondents when asked what prevents or discourages them from participating in feedback opportunities.

In our peer survey, collaboration with community partners was one of the most popular strategies for promoting involvement opportunities in a variety of communities. See Chapter 6 for more details.

Limited knowledge about projects was also a top reason community survey respondents would be discouraged from participation. Providing these critical details will lead to increased participation.

Promotional Activities

Project Website	Keeping project websites up to date with the latest information and engagement opportunities make it a perfect destination for anyone to learn more.
Email Blasts	Building a mailing list with stakeholders and public sign-ups provides an easy method of routine promotion to those most interested, especially for long-term engagement. In our community survey, email was both the preferred method for hearing about involvement opportunities and for contacting project teams to ask questions and provide feedback.
Print Mailers	Sending postcards or pamphlets to targeted addresses near the project area is an easy way to convey information and visuals as well as event information.
Posters and Signage	Visually-appealing and informative advertising in carefully chosen high-traffic areas such as grocery stores, laundromats and bus stops helps reach specific communities and demographics based on location.
Public Survey	Guide participants through a range of topics and informational content and collect input focused on your needs. Can be done in person, through the mail or online.
At-Stop/ Onboard Signage	For transit-related projects or projects that impact transit routes, consider posters and signs at stops and onboard vehicles to focus outreach specifically on transit riders.
Flyers and Doorhangers	Handing out flyers and placing doorhangers lets you meet residents and businesses where they are and enables discussions and Q&A along the way.
Newspaper Ads	Newspaper ads are more affordable and great for smaller towns and rural areas or to communities that prefer to communicate in other languages.
Social Media	Posts on your account and the accounts of your project and community partners can both raise awareness and direct people to the project website. Paid ads can target specific communities.
Radio and TV	Ads can help with promotion to target groups and in other languages. Media kits to stations can generate coverage and inclusion in community bulletins.
Get Creative	Every project and every community is different and can present unique opportunities to get the word out about your project and engagement opportunities. Contact your assigned Public Involvement Section representative for new and creative ideas.

Key Research Finding:

According to our community survey, email is the preferred source for learning about TxDOT projects and for providing feedback.

Print collateral like mailers, posters, and doorhangers were among the most-mentioned approaches in our peer agency survey for engaging harder-to-reach populations.

Step 6 – Hold Involvement Opportunities

Timing: Initiate this task immediately prior to your scheduled engagement.

Objective: Conduct the planned involvement opportunities and collect the input needed.

- **Prepare for Anything** – Estimate the number of printouts you will need for all participants, and then print more than that. Bring ample supplies of pens and other office supplies; anticipate people walking off with anything offered. Print out signage to identify all stations at events, as well as wayfinding signs for posting throughout the venue to direct participants to right location. Create printed nametags to clearly identify staff; incorporate special labels for bilingual staff or to indicate the organization each staffer is with. Think beyond office supplies: Masks, hand sanitizer, tissues, paper towels, wet wipes, every kind of tape, etc.
- **Arrive Early and Inspect** – Walk the venue to address any accessibility issues and to establish 'official' routes; post wayfinding signage accordingly (use painter's tape for anything posted on walls). If points of confusion are identified for parking or navigation, consider posting a staffer to help participants.
- **Setup and Prepare** – Lay out event spaces with a natural flow from the entrance to the exit, taking participants past every station they need to visit, especially at sign-in. Reference Chapter 5, section 1 for resources on room layout for optimal accessibility. Minimize clutter: keep supplies, jackets, bags and boxes out of the way, use cords and cables sparingly, and thoroughly tape down any cords and cables crossing floorspace. Be prepared to open doors to the public early if anyone arrives before the posted time.
- **Brief and Debrief** – Before each engagement session, bring event staff together to review roles and subject matter expertise. Warn of any potential concerns identified during setup. Walk staff through the room layout and intended flow so everyone can direct participants as needed. Discuss plans for handling public officials and news media, as well as what to do in case of emergency or if interactions become heated. After each session, recap what went well, what led to uncertainty or left staff feeling unprepared, and what can be done better next time.

Step 7 – Summarize and Reflect

Timing: Initiate this task immediately after your engagement(s) are complete.

> **"Provide comprehensive and accurate descriptions of the project in advance along with parameters of the input desired; don't have meetings to check the box."**
> – Community survey participant

Objective: To learn from the successes and shortcomings of this round of engagement and to prepare to form a feedback loop with partners and the public.

- **Evaluate Outreach** – Compare any demographic data collected from participants, as well as any data collected on how they heard about the engagement opportunities, to evaluate how successful you were at reaching different groups within the focus communities. Identify critical communities and discuss potential changes to future outreach or new community partners to reach out to for help in reaching those groups next time, if applicable. Project teams may be hesitant to collect demographic data at events; however, evaluation of outreach effectiveness is difficult to complete without this information. Collecting demographic data is a common practice, but it's important to make it optional.
- **Share What Was Heard** – Prepare an engagement summary recapping the outreach and engagement performed, what is known about who was reached and who participated, and what was heard from participants. Discuss this with community partners, particularly those who helped with outreach, and make a version of this report available to the public. This is vital for demonstrating transparency, building trust and showing that their input matters. If applicable, take time in future engagement to discuss your findings and how they shaped the project since then. Leverage communications channels like email, the project or meeting/hearing website and social media to describe the input requested and how it was used; detail any changes that were implemented; and share what will happen next in the public involvement program. Consider additional options like adding FAQs to the project website, releasing information to the media, or updating community partners. Work with your assigned Public Involvement Section contact for creative and innovative ideas.

Key recommendations from this chapter:

01	02	03	04
Complete Steps 1-3 as part of initial public involvement planning for your project or study. Revisit these steps at the beginning of each phase of public involvement to ensure accuracy and aid in decision-making for later steps.	Complete Step 4 about three months in advance of each public involvement phase on your project. Once Step 4 is complete and public involvement activities for each phase are identified, complete Step 5 to determine how to promote activities.	Complete activities included in Step 6 during final planning and execution of public involvement activities at each phase.	Activities included in Step 7 are critically important and should be completed at the end of each public involvement phase. After the outreach is complete, leverage communications channels like email and social media to describe the input requested and how it was used; detail any changes that were implemented; and share what will happen next in the public involvement program. Revisit findings from Step 7 when planning outreach and materials for subsequent public involvement phases. For example, at the public hearing phase, ensure materials reflect the input received during each public meeting, how input was used, and how the study or project recommendations reflect public input.

FIVE

Minimizing Barriers to Engagement

> “Describe the public participation process, describe how decisions are made and will have a say in the end results.”
>
> – Community survey participant

05 Minimizing Barriers to Engagement

As an initial step in the development of the guidance, the PI Section conducted extensive background research to source best practices and lessons learned from published studies across the country. During this phase, themes emerged, and we identified some of the most common reasons cited for lack of participation from a variety of groups. We gathered these reasons, identified them as “barriers” to public involvement and built our research strategy around confirming these barriers, identifying any barriers we might not yet be aware of, and understanding potential solutions for minimizing or eliminating these barriers, making involvement easier for the communities we serve.

The result is a set of one-pagers that each address a common barrier to public involvement and some techniques to minimize or eliminate that barrier. Designed to function independently of each other, these pages are reference guides to be accessed as related questions, topics or situations arise.

Review barrier one-pagers during initial public involvement planning for your project and incorporate actions to minimize applicable barriers into each public involvement planning phase.

Barriers Include:

- **1: Venue Accessibility** 40
- **2: Materials Accessibility** 42
- **3: Unsuitable Venues** 44
- **4: Limited English Proficiency** 46
- **5: Uneasiness/Wariness of Government Interaction** 48
- **6: Cultural/Personal Values** 50
- **7: Personal Obligations** 52
- **8: Limited Skills/Education** 54
- **9: Misunderstanding of Process** 56
- **10: Misunderstanding of Project** 58

01 Venue Accessibility

Problems and issues with public meeting sites and events make it hard for participants with disabilities and/or other mental or physical limitations to participate. See more advice in Chapter 5, section 3 on Unsuitable Venues.

Key Research Finding:

More than a quarter of survey respondents with disabilities cited accessible venues as important to encourage their participation.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Anticipate

Try to anticipate accessibility needs in advance. We recommend speaking to local stakeholders and using your community profile to identify populations with disabilities and other limitations. Promote contact details for accommodation requests often in promotional materials (see Chapter 3 for more information on how to build a community profile).

2. Visit

Visit venues in person and walk the obvious routes from the parking lot to the meeting space. Ensure walkways are well lit and at least 3-feet wide, ramps are gently sloped, doors can be propped open or have electric openers, and the total distance isn't too long. If elevator use is needed, they should be functional, nearby, and easy to find. Walk between the meeting space and amenities such as bathrooms and water fountains to see if they are convenient and accessible.

3. Arrange

When arranging furniture and displays, do not block walkways and leave room for wheelchairs and other mobility aids; wheelchairs need up to a 60-inch diameter space to fully maneuver. Use tables that are 28-34 inches high with 27 inches of space underneath. Plan with flexibility so people with mobility aids and service animals can be accommodated in seating. Pack tape to cover any cords to avoid tripping hazards and bring yellow tape to block off any troublesome areas.

5. Schedule

Schedule breaks to allow people to take care of any needs and save less important activities and information for later in the meeting to accommodate early departures. Alternatively, consider come-and-go meeting formats such as open houses.

5. Ask

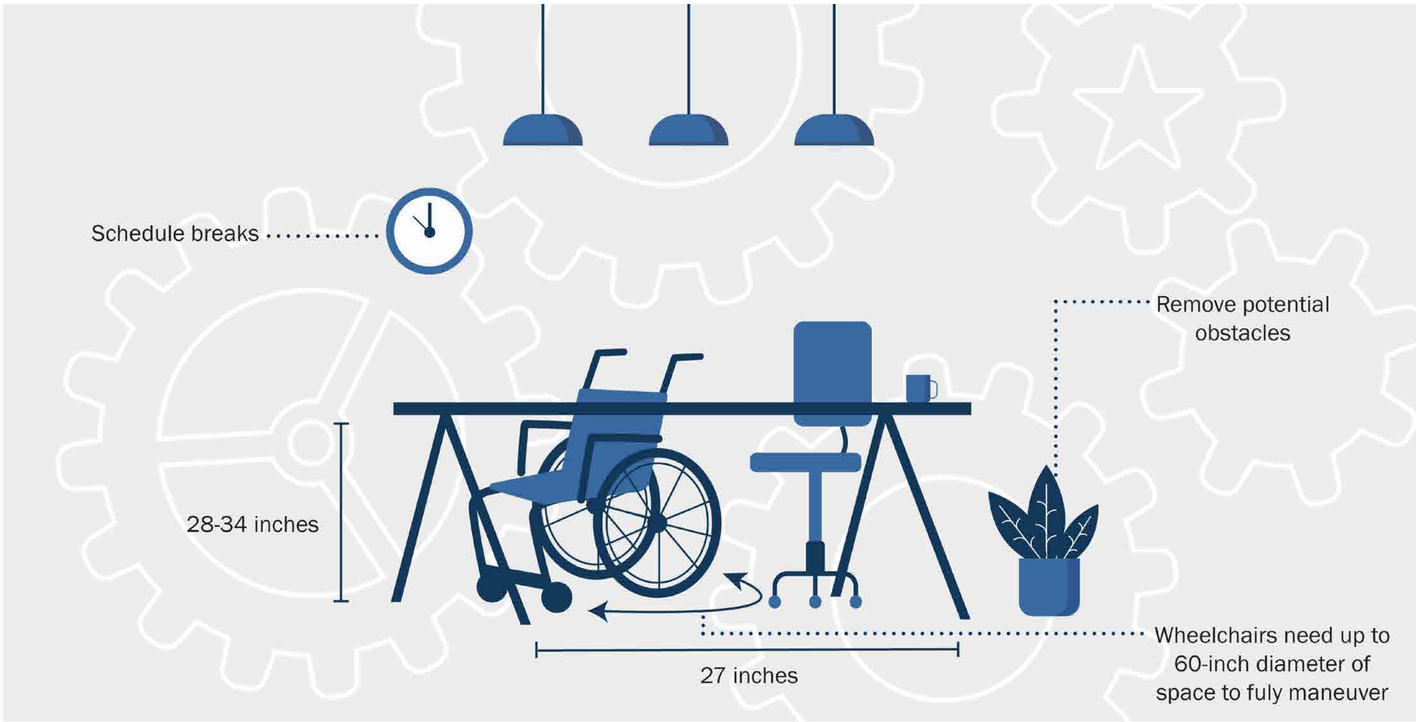
Ask the public questions—perhaps as brief surveys or on comment forms—about the quality and suitability of meeting design and venue choice to identify what worked well and shortcomings to address in the future.

Additional Considerations

- Venues and events that 'meet accessibility standards' still may not provide a quality experience for all. Prioritize holding events at public buildings, particularly newer facilities, to provide the best experience possible.
- Think beyond 'disability:' Many impairments aren't classified as disabilities or may not be visible from the outside, and many people with serious impairments may not consider themselves disabled. Avoid singling anyone out and be inclusive with how you discuss disability.
- Strive for venue accessibility whenever possible! Don't depend on accommodation requests; some are uncomfortable with making requests or may feel discouraged from participation if they need to make requests. Events that are accessible for people with disabilities are easier for everyone.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- Venues that are difficult to navigate for those using mobility aids like wheelchairs or for those who struggle with stairs, multiple pathways and turns, and long distances. Be mindful of pavement condition and weather during outdoor events.
- Furniture and other objects are at inappropriate heights, are arranged in ways that limit movement, and cannot be rearranged to accommodate mobility aids and service animals. Amenities like restrooms are inadequate.
- Events do not provide breaks or flexibility for those who need to leave early or suddenly.



Links	
https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/commission-disability-rights/accessible-meetings-toolkit.pdf	Provides checklists for assessing venues and meeting runs-of-show
https://www.omssa.com/docs/OMSSA_Conducting_Accessible_Meetings.pdf	Features room layout ssuggestions

02 Materials Accessibility

Poor design and exhibition of informational materials causes difficulties for those with visual or hearing impairments.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Anticipate

Try to anticipate accessibility needs in advance. Speak to local stakeholders and use your community profile to identify populations with disabilities and other limitations. Promote contact details for accommodation requests often in promotional materials (see Chapter 3 for more information on how to build a community profile). Ensuring materials are ADA-compliant often requires specialized staff and typically requires time to complete between materials finalization and public release. Anticipate these needs from both a schedule and staffing perspective.

2. Contrast

Materials should have strong color contrasts; one way to check this is by test-printing a black-and-white copy. Use TxDOT's approved fonts and consider increasing standard font sizes to ensure legibility. Avoid reducing font size and spacing to pack content into a small space. Balance font sizes with the intended viewing distance; what is big enough on screen may not be big enough for posters and slide decks.

Additional tips:

Use both colors and symbols
You shouldn't rely on color alone to convey a message. Consider this in creating charts, graphs, and infographics.

Use patterns and textures to show contrast
Try to use different textures, as opposed to multiple colors, for elements that require emphasis.

Avoid bad color combinations
As shown in the graphic on the next page.

3. Caption

Provide captioning for live events and videos when possible. American Sign Language (ASL) can be an alternative option for live events but can be more expensive and not everyone who is deaf or hard-of-hearing understands ASL. If not providing this by default, explore captioning and ASL services available to you in advance so that you are prepared for accommodation requests.

4. Format

Online content needs descriptive alternative (alt)-texts for visuals and graphics. Alt-text is meant to convey the "why" of the image as it relates to the content of a document or webpage. It is read aloud to users by screen reader software. Text in graphics should be separately overlaid on top of each graphic as screen readers can't read text embedded in graphic files.

5. Provide Options

As an alternative to watching a presentation for those with hearing impairments, prepare a version of the presentation with high-quality captioning or a version that adds the information communicated verbally into each slide's content.

6. Ask

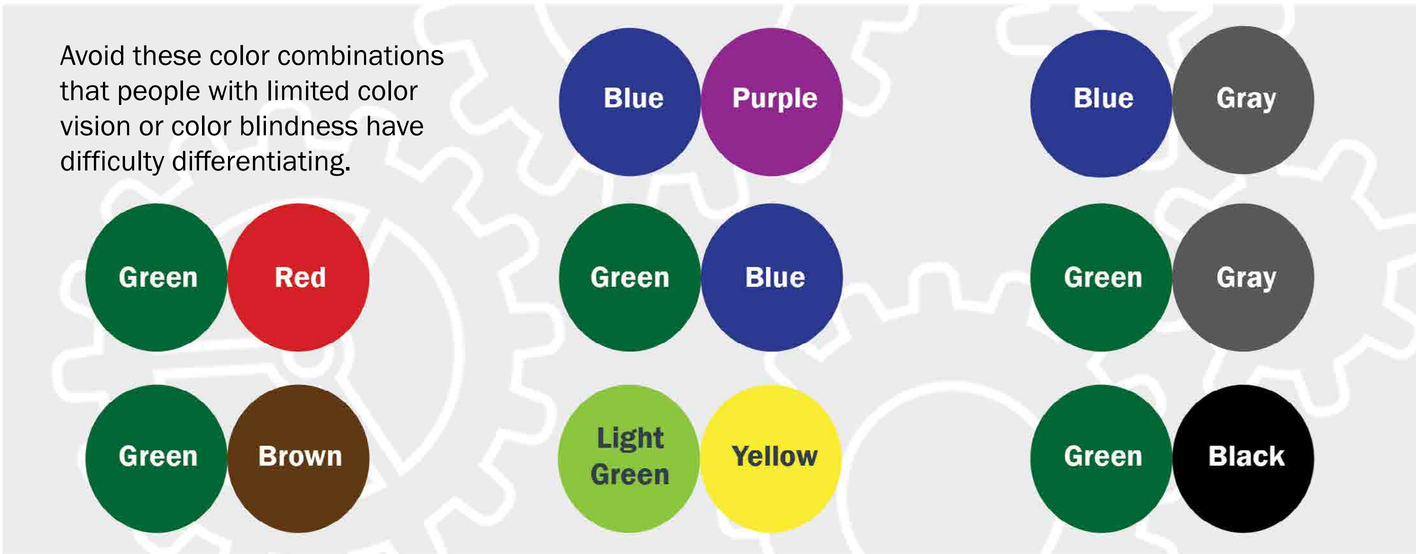
Ask the public questions—perhaps as brief surveys or on comment forms—about the quality and suitability of informational materials to identify what worked well and shortcomings to address in the future.

Additional Considerations

- Materials and activities that 'meet accessibility standards' still may not provide a quality experience for all.
- Many impairments aren't classified as disabilities, and many people with serious impairments may not consider themselves disabled.
- Make materials accessible whenever possible! Don't depend on accommodation requests; some are uncomfortable with making requests or may feel unwelcome or discouraged by the need to ask. Accessible materials are often clearer, easier to read and interpret for everyone.
- Go beyond the generic printable comment form; create an online comment form or add an interactive survey to the engagement.
- Work with the Public Involvement Section to generate ideas on creating more robust and interactive feedback tools, and options for ensuring these tools grab participant's attention at online or in-person events. Ensuring feedback options are easy and accessible is a critical component to success.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- Materials like presentations, brochures and posters that are designed with hard-to-read fonts, low-contrast colors and crowded layouts, making them difficult to view for those with visual impairments.
- Videos and live events that rely on speaking and audio fail to accommodate deaf and hard-of-hearing participants.
- Online content is not compatible with screen readers and other aids and is poorly adapted into off-line formats.



Links	
https://www.txdot.gov/about/brand-guidelines.html	TxDOT's official design guide
https://www.section508.gov/create/	For guides on creating accessible materials of all kinds
https://www.omssa.com/docs/OMSSA_Conducting_Accessible_Meetings.pdf	Includes room layout suggestion diagrams for events with sign language or live captioning
https://accessibleweb.com/color-contrast-checker/	For testing adequate contrast between pairs of colors

03 Unsuitable Venues

Venues that are poorly located for convenient travel for participants. Venue has inadequate capacity or parking options for the number of participants involved. See more advice in Chapter 5, section 1 on Venue Accessibility.

Key Research Finding:

More than a third of survey respondents said transit access and parking availability are key to encouraging in-person participation.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Anticipate

Determine the locations of your potential public involvement venues and use a tool like Google Maps to estimate travel times via different transportation modes. See which transit routes would be used and check that they run while you're holding the event. Consider including information on transit routes in promotional materials.

2. Verify

Verify service to the meeting venue at the planned time with local paratransit agencies.

3. Provide Options

For larger, car-dependent project areas, choose centrally located venues near major roadways. As strongly encouraged by TxDOT, include virtual engagement component(s) to save on travel and accommodate people who do not have reliable transportation. Consider multiple engagement opportunities to provide flexibility.

4. Visit

Avoid selecting venues that require paid parking, permitted parking, and time-limited parking, and venues that do not have sufficient free parking available. Visit the venue in advance to verify, accounting for the date and time of your event, as some restrictions may vary throughout the day and week.

> **"Stay away from places that do not have good parking. Avoid events after dark."**
> – Community survey respondent

5. Estimate

Estimate or ask venue staff if your planned layout will limit capacity below what's posted, for example, if the furniture and exhibits you need will restrict movement such that a full capacity is no longer possible. If you have used this venue before and it felt crowded, consider a larger venue, especially if higher turnout is expected.

6. Consider

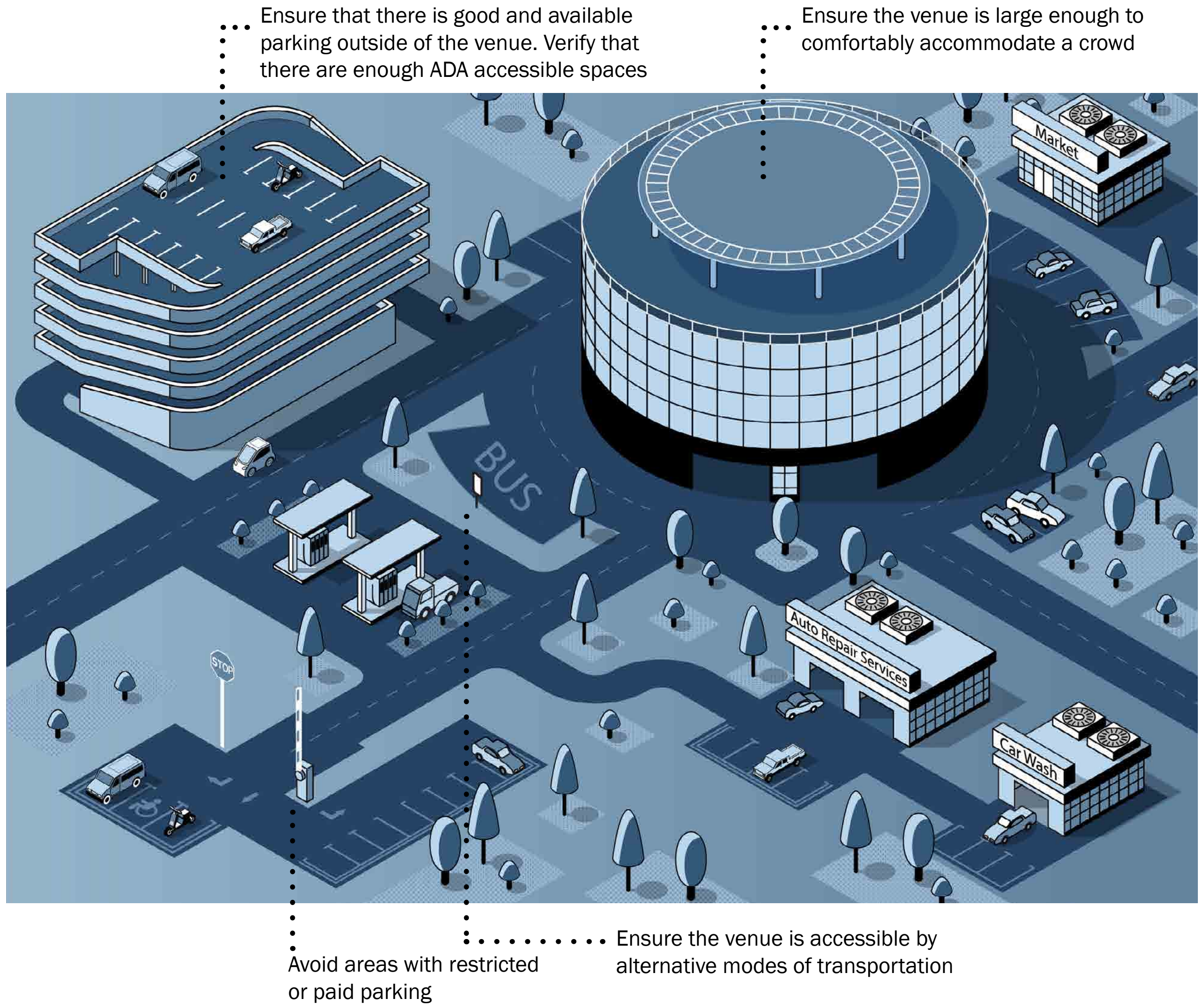
Consider using meeting sign-ups or RSVPs to gauge potential turnout compared to past meetings, remembering that people may attend without signing up.

Additional Considerations

- Not everyone travels by car. Venues that are a short drive away may be very far for those walking, biking or using public transportation. Many community members rely on alternative modes of transportation; failing to account for this can skew representation.
- Stated venue capacities may not reflect what feels comfortable and inviting.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- Venues are too far away from where the target audience lives and works, preventing their attendance or requiring too much of their time to be worthwhile to attend.
- Venue lacks adequate parking spaces or relies on paid parking options, which can be a burden to participants.
- Meeting space is at or past capacity, or near enough to capacity to feel crowded and unwelcoming.



Links	
https://www.planning.org/blog/9203230/guide-to-choosing-best-meeting-venues/	Includes a guide of questions and considerations for selecting a meeting venue, expanding on some topics covered here

04 Limited English Proficiency

Lack of translated materials or interpreters for live events limits participation of those with limited understanding of English.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Plan

Plan for common languages in target communities and devote professional translation to live events, technical information and other materials where accuracy and clarity are vital.

2. Advertise

Advertise the availability of language assistance in the language(s) most likely needed. Advertising language assistance in English does little to support communities with limited English proficiency.

3. Communicate

Media toolkits can help encourage media to communicate to their audiences on your behalf.

Key Research Finding:

Many peer agencies surveyed reported using radio and newspaper advertisements and social media for reaching particular ethnic groups, particularly in their own language.

4. Translation/Interpretation

Informal translators and interpreters, such as those who speak a language but have not been formally trained for translation/interpretation, can still be useful for helping at events, reviewing edits to translated materials, and preparing less-technical materials like flyers and social media posts. Formal translation and interpretation is likely needed for more technical materials and/or live interpretation in front of an audience. See Chapter 4, step 3 for more information on translation support.

5. Pace

Have presenters speak in a slower, steadier pace to help translators keep up with what's said. Avoid use of figurative language, puns, idioms, acronyms and slang.

6. Verbalize

Don't rely on text on slides and in visuals to convey information. Provide verbal explanation so the concepts are still shared in translation.

Additional Considerations

- While Spanish is the most common non-English language spoken in Texas, don't assume it's the only one.
- Informal translators/interpreters and the public may be skilled in everyday conversation in a language but can struggle with technical information presented in that language. Someone who can converse well in a given language might have limited ability to read/write in it or vice-versa.
- Computer translations should not be assumed to be accurate and may produce results that are understandable but low quality.
- Poor translations that are difficult to access may make those needing them feel unwelcome. People may be uncomfortable requesting translations or might assume they will be available in languages common to their community.
- People who share a language don't necessarily think the same things. Avoid treating these groups as if they hold unanimous opinions and preferences. Don't let anyone speak for everyone.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- Translated materials are not available or are poor quality, limiting the ability of some to learn about projects and initiatives as well as events discussing them.
- Lack of translators during live events can prevent some from understanding presented information and participating in Q&A and other activities.
- Presenters speak too quickly, use figurative language, or use technical terms and acronyms without defining them, making live translation difficult. Presentation materials rely heavily on untranslated text or graphics without text-based explanation materials.

Key Research Finding:

Asian respondents to our survey were most likely to cite a lack of information in their preferred language as a barrier to participation.

Our peer agency survey found that providing translated materials ensures the public of a committed effort to engage all community members, even when these materials are not used.

Links	
https://dot.alaska.gov/cvlrts/forms/Engaging_LEP_Populations.pdf	A guide to alternative ways of engaging LEP and low-literacy communities

05 Uneasiness/Wariness of Government Interaction

Participants may lack faith in the motives of government agencies or are worried about consequences for themselves and others when discussing legally sensitive topics.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Explain

Be transparent about the decision-making process. Explain options being considered, criteria being used, and when and how decisions are made. Follow up as planning progresses, and 'show your work' in how things got to where they are now.

2. Demonstrate

Establish a feedback loop. Set clear expectations about what feedback is being sought and how it will be used. Demonstrate how feedback has shaped the project by noting how the project has changed or evolved based on public feedback, or demonstrate how public feedback was evaluated, even if it did not result in changes to the project. If it did not, explain why not. Be specific and proactive about sharing this information on fact sheets, the website and on exhibits. Involve key decision-makers in events so the public can speak directly to them.

Key Research Finding:

Half of our survey respondents said getting a better understanding of the feedback needed and how it would be used would make them more likely to participate.

3. Encourage

Encourage communication outside of events. Use email, phone, social media and/or postal mail, for the public to reach out with questions and concerns that they might not feel comfortable discussing in public.

4. Build

Build relationships with public figures and community advocates who work with the populations you are trying to reach. Include them in outreach when possible so they can help you gain trust. Remember that their trust in you will help to build the community's trust in you.

5. Be Thoughtful

TxDOT is aware of the sensitivity of including law enforcement in events as reputations can vary between communities. Police presence affects what people are comfortable discussing. Be thoughtful about where police officers are stationed at the event.

6. Provide Anonymity

Include and emphasize channels for anonymous comment, allowing participants to be honest and open without fear of consequence.

Key Research Finding:

13% of community survey respondents said they don't feel comfortable providing their name and identity in public.

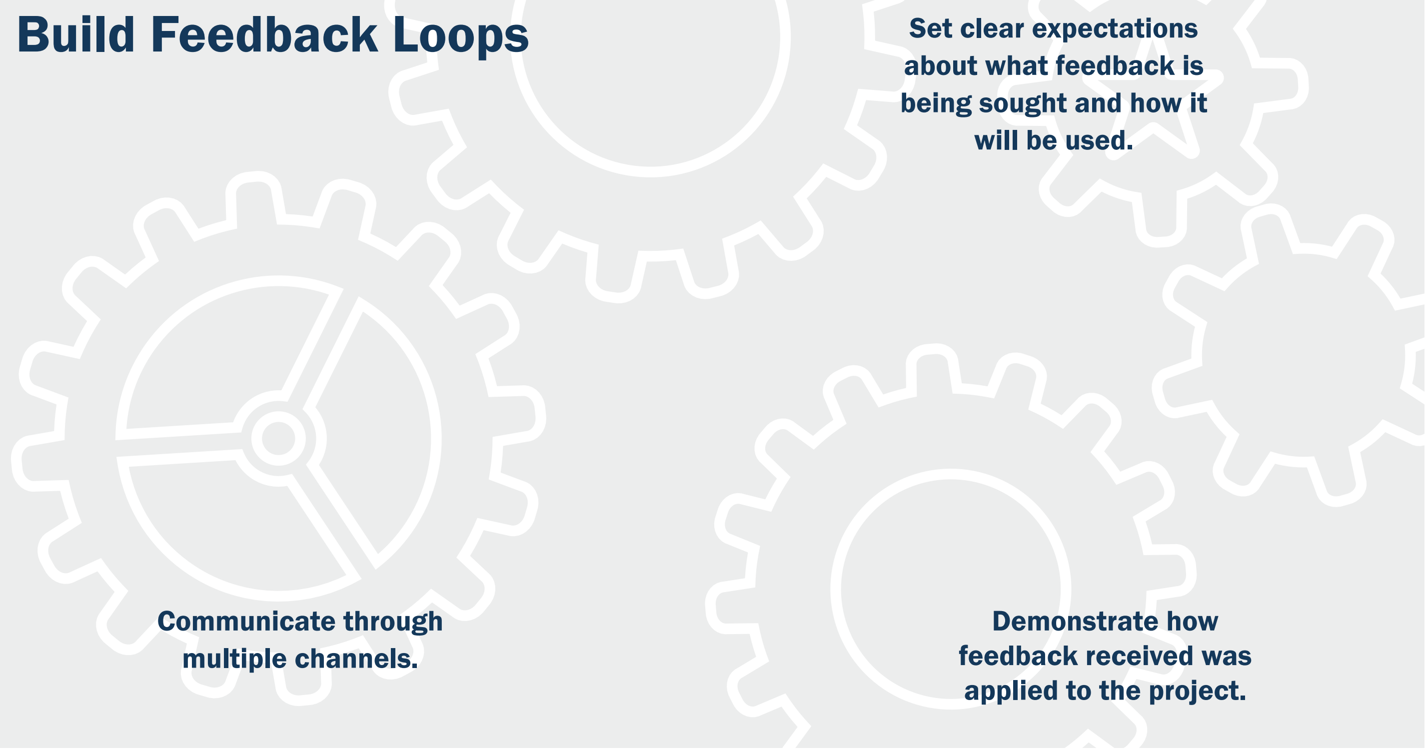
Additional Considerations

- Distrust is not always baseless. Many communities can point to previous situations where they feel that their voices were ignored, or the interests of others were unfairly put ahead of theirs. Be willing to have honest discussions about these misgivings.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- Participants feel that public involvement is being performed in bad faith, and that the government will do what it wants to regardless of public input.
- The public is hesitant to increase interactions with government officials due to immigration status or previous experiences with law enforcement.
- The public doubts the goals of a project, instead believing that the agency is motivated by serving the interests of themselves or specific stakeholders.
- Participants are reluctant to speak to personal experiences on topics they feel may get them in legal trouble, such as immigration status.

Build Feedback Loops



Links	
https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Publica-tions/Creating%20the%20Culture%20for%20Engagement.pdf	A guide to overcoming engagement fears, including engaging populations that have poor histories with and distrust in public agencies

06 Cultural and Personal Values

Cultural norms discourage some from participating or aren't compatible with how events are structured. For example, in some cultures, cultural norms might shape how people of different genders interact with each other, or they could influence hesitancy to question elders or people in roles of perceived / actual authority. Social and political opinions can lead some to hold negative attitudes toward a project.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Identify

Identify advocates who work with diverse populations to assist in planning public involvement. Work with them to tailor involvement strategies and meeting schedules and formats to suit the needs and norms of those they represent.

2. Look for Leaders

Community leaders and faith-based organizations can help you understand a community's preferences as well as provide unique outreach opportunities.

Key Research Finding:

Community leaders and faith-based organizations were the most frequently cited partners for engaging a variety of populations by respondents to our peer agency survey.

3. Communicate Goals

Don't rely on everyone seeing the value in your stated goals. Some may need to be convinced of the worth of those goals, the government's role in addressing them, and how those goals relate to them.

4. Accept, Respond, Listen

Accept that not everyone will ultimately support the project, but still make the case for it and hear any disagreements.

5. Be Flexible

Keep an open mind and stay flexible. Cultural preferences can show up in surprising ways.

Key Research Finding:

For example, our community survey showed variation in preferred meeting styles and times across different racial/ ethnic groups.

Additional Considerations

- People who are part of the same culture don't think the same things. Avoid speaking of and treating them as if they hold unanimous opinions and preferences. Don't let anyone speak for everyone.
- Cultural and personal values aren't just a barrier for people new to the community. Long-time locals can also hold beliefs that can make engagement difficult.
- Don't assume someone completely adheres to their culture's values. People adapt to cultures to different degrees, and some may act contrary to the norm.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- A participant's culture sets expectations on who can speak to and make decisions on various topics. This sense of authority may depend on age, gender, social status and more.
- Participants are discouraged from attending an event due to its scheduled time or date overlapping with religious or cultural observances.
- Personal opinions about the purpose of a project and the government's role in pursuing that purpose can give certain members of the public a preconceived negative attitude.

Links	
https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ten_ideas_to_encourage_immigrant_engagement_2015_0.pdf	A short guide to engaging cultural and immigrant communities

07 Personal Obligations

Due to personal time constraints such as work, school and caregiving, participants are limited in their ability to review information and attend events and meetings.

Key Research Finding:

One in five survey respondents said they are discouraged from participation by not having the time to attend meetings.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Vary Meeting Times

Vary days of the week and times of day for in-person meeting scheduling. Try to hold multiple events at varied times to allow participants to choose the sessions that suit their schedule.

2. Meeting Formats

Consider providing a variety of meeting formats, mixing formal meetings with open houses and other come-and-go events that let people decide when to participate and for how long. At a minimum, make materials available online; consider a more robust online meeting format that more closely mirrors the in-person experience.

Key Research Finding:

38% of community survey participants said they would be more likely to participate if a come-and-go format was offered.

3. Focus

Keep events focused and on time, with less important and optional components saved for the end to facilitate early departures. Avoid going past the announced end time.

4. Provide Options

Make information available with easy means of providing feedback outside of the formal event structure, like through online engagement via a virtual open house or webpage with online comment forms. Materials should be well-organized and well-named so participants can quickly find what they need. Keep this material brief and easily understood without sacrificing informational quality. Record and upload videos of events when possible.

5. Conduct Informal Engagement

Meet people where they are now. Use informal forms of engagement such as distributing flyers or setting up pop-up events at targeted high-traffic areas like grocery stores, sporting events, community / religious centers, or community service locations to give people a chance to participate by only taking a few minutes out of their routine. Use short, mobile-friendly surveys accessible by short URLs or QR codes for convenient feedback opportunities.

Key Research Finding:

Peer agencies surveyed rated this 'grassroots' approach as one of their most successful strategies for reaching populations from whom they don't normally hear.

Additional Considerations

- Inconsistency in obligations can prevent people from committing to attending events, especially if they can't choose to attend on short notice.
- Even seemingly minor instances of starting or ending meetings late can be particularly consequential for those with the least free time and flexibility in their schedule. One bad experience can be enough to discourage someone from future participation entirely.
- Groups often left out of the process are often those most burdened by work, school, caregiving and other obligations; inconvenient and inflexible opportunities can skew representation.
- Plan to record events whenever possible to post on TxDOT's YouTube account afterwards for the public to watch on their own schedule. Be sure to add captions and transcripts to make these videos accessible.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- Events require participants to devote substantial time to travel and/or attendance and are scheduled during times when many are occupied with work, school or family.
- Lack of variety in scheduling events prevents people who otherwise have time and interest from attending.
- Information and feedback opportunities are not made available outside of specific, time-bound events, providing no alternative for those who would rather participate on their own limited schedules.

Links	
https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/meeting-people-where-they-are	An article about convenient 'meeting people where they are' engagement online and in person

08 Limited Skills/Education

Literacy and mathematical difficulties limit the ability to study engagement materials. Information presented is too technical for the target audience to easily understand.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Explain

Presenters should explain everything on the slide and/or be stationed at exhibits to proactively explain content. Avoid unnecessary detail and irrelevant information as much as possible to keep the amount of content being presented to a focused minimum.

2. Record

Record and upload videos of events when possible and create videos of other vital information to assist those who struggle with written materials.

3. Simplify

Present data in common units, include standard and metric units when useful. Use simple graphs, clear visuals and organized tables; label clearly! Contextualize numbers with metaphors, percentages and comparisons that the public would be more familiar with. According to the The Literacy Project, the average American reads at the 7th- to 8th-grade level. Be clear but creative!

4. Incorporate

Materials for the public should be easily understood by the public. Be sure to use lay person's language and avoid jargon that would not be understood by the general public. Incorporate someone without expert knowledge - such as your Public Involvement Specialist - into your review process and have them flag anything that is not clear to them.

5. Spell it Out

Spell out all acronyms and then define them. For technical terminology that cannot be avoided, define the terms as well. Consider using a glossary slide or section early on for easy reference.

6. Provide Options

Don't rely solely on written comment options; provide verbal comment options or offer to transcribe a participant's comments if they seem hesitant to complete a comment card.

7. Ask

Ask the public questions—perhaps as brief surveys or on comment forms—about the quality and clarity of informational materials to identify what worked well and shortcomings to address in the future.

Additional Considerations

- People can have different skill levels between written and verbal communication; someone who can converse verbally isn't necessarily able to read and write. People can even have variances between reading and writing ability.
- Many, regardless of education, struggle to contextualize numbers or understand statistical data. Unexplained technical detail can be difficult for even highly educated members of the public.
- Failing to make information easy to understand and respond to can skew representation, intimidate people into believing they do not know enough to participate, and create mistrust and the appearance of obscuring important information.
- Limited literacy and numeracy have a variety of causes and are often stigmatized in society; there is no 'typical' person who struggles with either, and many are reluctant to ask for help.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- Limited literacy prevents some from fully understanding prepared materials.
- Mathematical limitations prevent some from fully understanding numeric figures and statistics.
- Technical information is poorly explained and acronyms and vocabulary are left undefined. Material relies on jargon and is written for a professional audience rather than for the public.

Links	
https://dot.alaska.gov/cvlrts/forms/Engaging_LEP_Populations.pdf	A guide to alternative ways of engaging low-literacy and LEP communities
https://granicus.com/blog/4-key-ways-engage-low-literacy-commu-nities-online	Data on literacy and numeracy and advice for digital engagement

09 Misunderstanding of Process

The public has not been made aware of their vital role in the planning process and how to provide feedback, leading to confusion and disinterest in participating.

> **Key Research Finding:**
> More than a third of our community survey participants said that they feel like their input won't matter, making them less likely to participate.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Emphasize

Emphasize the involvement goals of every event. Clearly state what opportunities there will be for feedback and explain how feedback will be used. Avoid words like 'vote', 'decide', or 'choose' unless the public is given direct control over a decision.

> **Key Research Finding:**
> Around half of our community survey participants indicated that being provided with a better understanding of the purpose of their input would make them more likely to participate. Manage expectations at each step of the process.

2. Describe

In promotional materials, name and describe events being held so attendees have an accurate idea of what is going to be covered.

3. Discuss

Discuss the timeline of the planning process, including each phase in that process and the public's role in each phase. Discuss when major decisions occur and which topics will be addressed during which phase.

> **Key Research Finding:**
> Several peer agencies surveyed recommend devoting time in meetings for later phases of engagement to recap what was heard in the previous phase, what changed as a result and including this information in follow-up communications as well.

4. Manage Expectations

Manage expectations at each step of the process. Participants who feel like their participation was not valued or effective in early phases will be less likely to participate further.

5. Manage Frequency

Be careful with holding events too often. Participants can grow weary of the process asking so much of their time and holding too many events makes each individual event feel less important.

6. Clearly Communicate

Clearly state how and where to provide comment on all materials, including any relevant deadline dates. Use project-specific means of contact when possible. Make providing feedback convenient.

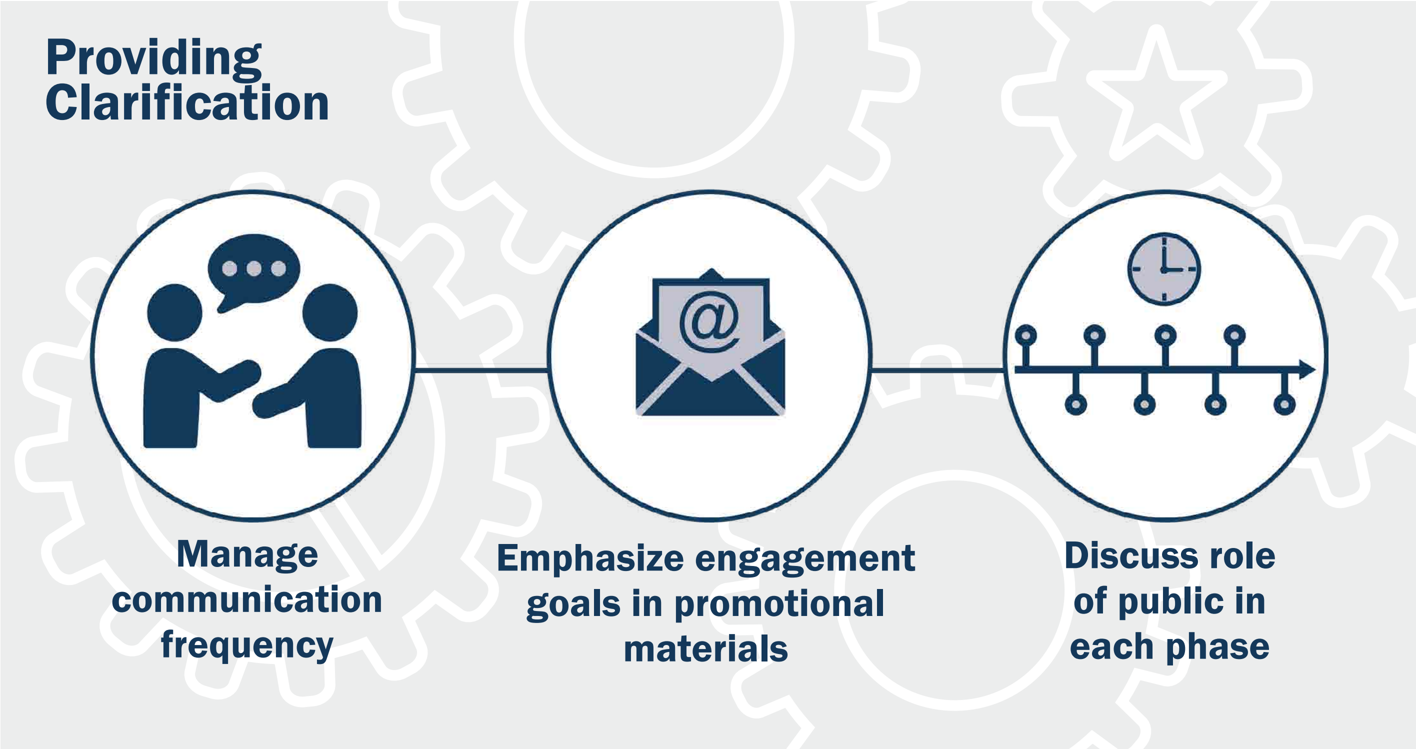
> **Key Research Finding:**
> More than 80% of community survey participants indicated email is their preferred means of submitting comments, with roughly half also preferring online comment forms on project websites.

Additional Considerations

- Do not assume the public is apathetic toward participating; many major contributors to this barrier, such as poor communication and experiences with previous projects, are not the public's fault.
- Do not mistake genuine disinterest for confusion. Some people, no matter the situation, have no desire to take part in the participatory process. Others may choose to not participate because they are content with a project or initiative and have nothing more to say.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- Members of the public have misconceived expectations about the purpose of involvement events and activities and are left unprepared for or unsatisfied by what was asked of them.
- The project team does not convey how public input was used, leading the public to think that their feedback is not valued.
- Members of the public have no expectations of events and activities and are left to assume their purpose is merely informational.
- The project team has poorly informed the public about the importance of specific events or the participatory process overall, leading members of the public to ignore these opportunities.
- Materials do not list specifics on how to submit comments, leaving participants needing to research or guess the appropriate place to direct their feedback.



10 Misunderstanding of Project

Lack of effective prior outreach leaves the public uninformed about the project or initiative and unsure of what importance it is to them.

Key Research Finding:

Over 55% of our community survey respondents said not knowing enough about projects prevents or discourages them from participating and submitting feedback.

Techniques to Minimize Barrier

1. Be Clear

Be clear from the start what the project or initiative is, what issues it seeks to address or opportunities it aims to create, and why it matters for the community. Reemphasize this summary often and evolve it as planning progresses. Include this information on your project's fact sheet or on a slide or exhibit.

Key Research Finding:

The three things people most want to know are project purpose and need, potential positive and negative impacts, and the project schedule.

2. Communicate Unknowns

Help participants understand what is and is not yet known about the project and provide timeframes for when what is not yet known will be studied and addressed.

3. Be Honest

Be honest and forthcoming when sharing information with the public.

Key Research Finding:

72% of community survey participants said knowing more about a project would make them more likely to participate.

4. Explain

Explain the information being shared to avoid leaving things open to interpretation.

5. Address Misconceptions

Pay attention to what is being discussed about the project outside of your outreach efforts and feedback channels. Learn about what alternative interpretations and narratives exist in the public on social media and online discussion forums. Address misconceptions without assigning blame.

Links	
https://www.phi.org/thought-leadership/five-ways-to-combat-misin-formation-when-communicating-about-covid/	A guide about combating misinformation in government public outreach

Additional Considerations

- Addressing project misunderstandings is vital from the beginning of outreach and engagement. One of the biggest motivators that drives lasting participation is believing that the project in question is of importance to a participant.
- Addressing this early is also vital because it is much easier to correctly inform people from the beginning than it is to try to talk people out of misconceptions later. If you aren't telling people what they need to know, they will seek answers elsewhere.

Common Examples of This Barrier

- Shortcomings in early phases of outreach can leave the public unaware of a project or initiative or leave them confused about what it is and what it is intended to address.
- Poor explanations about a project or initiative and what it addresses leave the public uncertain of what relevance and importance it is to them.
- Vague, poorly explained engagement materials leave room for inaccuracies, rumors and misinformation to drive public awareness.

Key recommendations from this chapter:

01

During initial public involvement planning for your project, review this chapter's one-pagers to determine which common barriers to public participation apply to your project.

02

During planning for each public involvement phase, incorporate the steps identified on applicable one-pagers to minimize or eliminate barriers to public involvement on your project.

SIX

Building Community Partnerships

"Advertising the meetings via social media and local government offices is good, but perhaps advertising meeting times at houses of worship and local businesses would also help."

– Community survey participant

06 Building Community Partnerships

TxDOT's public involvement outcomes are enhanced through successful community partnerships. Through relationship building, partnerships with community and advocacy organizations help bridge communication gaps that may exist between TxDOT and critical populations the Agency wants to involve. Community partnerships can also extend the TxDOT message to community members that may otherwise be left out.

Key Research Finding:

According to our survey of peer agencies, local partnerships with entities including non-profits, faith-based entities, schools, and senior centers are among the best strategies for engaging harder-to-reach populations.

Good partnerships are rooted in common ground and opportunities to align areas of interest. Partnership building involves a complete communication loop designed to further your engagement goals while establishing and building long-term trust.

Action Steps

It's important to identify and establish your community partners, which can come from a wide field of stakeholders. Consider how these potential partnership groups could impact your project:

- **Local leaders:** This can include elected officials or informal leaders, such as trusted community organizers and advocates.
- **Business community:** These partners can be major employers, grocery stores, small business owners, or business groups such as chambers of commerce, particularly businesses and chambers that cater to a specific ethnic, racial or socioeconomic group.
- **Civic groups:** These stakeholders promote the interests of their community and can include neighborhood associations, tenants' groups, and more.
- **Advocacy groups:** These organizations focus on addressing certain issues in their communities, such as transit access, disability rights, or helping those in need. Think about community service providers like Salvation Army, Goodwill, offices that provide food assistance (food stamps, WIC offices), and offices that provide childcare assistance.
- **Education community:** Schools are a cornerstone of many communities and can provide unique means of communication and opportunities for high-traffic engagement.
- **Cultural organizations:** These may focus on serving specific racial or ethnic groups in a community, assisting with language classes and translation needs, or aiding immigrants.
- **Faith-based organizations:** Places of worship are commonly the focal point for gathering and providing assistance within a community, often extending beyond religious services and into volunteering, community organizing, and helping those in need.

Next Step

Connect and Communicate

With potential partners identified, you're ready to reach out and connect.

1 **Identify your goals:** Discuss the project itself and its objectives, what phase it's currently in, and the role of public feedback at this stage. Identify the target audience, what has already been done to try to reach them, and why their voices matter to you. If you have performed earlier rounds of engagement, discuss what was heard from the community and needs for improvement that were identified for future outreach. If this partner has worked with TxDOT in the past, discuss that experience and any ways it can be improved. Make it clear that their help is a vital part of the process.

2 **Begin planning:** Discuss the communication channels available between the partner and the audience you're trying to reach, as well as opportunities they can provide for in-person outreach (e.g., events they host, if they have any particular times or locations with high foot traffic, etc.). With this information, decide which methods to use and establish a plan for when and where outreach will take place, as well as any outreach materials that are needed for each method. As time allows, seek their feedback on draft materials to help ensure they're suitable for the target audience.

3 **Implement your plan:** Conduct outreach with the partner's help, following through on what was planned. Go the extra mile to help them make it a success by being available and helpful. Be proactive in communication throughout to discuss progress and ways to modify and improve plans if needed.

4 **Ongoing communication:** Once an engagement is complete, follow up by exploring what you heard from the community and what you felt were the successes and shortcomings. Take note of any insights they can provide on what was heard, as well as ways to improve future rounds of outreach. Ask partners to confirm any actions taken for documentation and results tracking. Partnerships can be one-time only or potentially ongoing. Even if a project doesn't provide the opportunity for an additional engagement, remember that building a trusting relationship lays a strong foundation for future project engagements. Keep in mind that ongoing communication does not have to be about a specific project. Communication can continue through attendance at local festivals and events, materials and promotional products sharing, and unstructured conversations.

Key Research Finding:
A common theme of responses to our peer agency survey was the importance of building partnerships in the long term so that they are willing to leverage the trust they have with their communities on an agency's behalf.

Ongoing Activity

Build Lasting Relationships

In addition to the steps described above, here are a few tips to get the most out of your partnership engagement – each of which will help ensure that you're focusing on building a productive and lasting relationship.

Identify groups or organizations that share a common goal.

Take the time to clearly think about what you need and who the right partners are to lay the groundwork for relationships that can develop meaningfully over time. To begin, consider how a project impacts local issues (for example: transit access, active transportation, housing and development, social mobility, community connections) and identify groups that align to those interests.

- **Be clear about the purpose of the partnership.**
  What can both parties achieve by working together? Is the relationship with the organization about collaboration and joint action, or perhaps it's about information sharing and allowing for voices to be heard, regardless of their support or agreement with a project? Understanding how TxDOT and the organization work together can help set the framework for expectations on the level of continuous engagement.
- **Familiarize yourself with the group or organization.**
  Spend time reading their website and any available materials. Learn and understand the organization's mission, key areas of interest and key leaders. Review if this organization has helped TxDOT with outreach efforts in the past.
- **Begin outreach and engagement early in the process.**
  It's never too early to start forming a relationship. Different partners have different schedules and workloads, and some may need more time to work with you than others. Also, you may not always connect with the right contacts at first and may need additional help to be put in touch with the right people to help you. Through in-person engagement and networking, you can establish new contacts, meet key individuals and begin the work of solidifying yourself and TxDOT as a valuable, committed partner in the community.
- **Work with partners to set expectations.**
  When working together, try to create clarity of roles and responsibilities between TxDOT and the group or organization. Set expectations on an on-going basis for decision making, frequency of interaction, communication and follow up. Be clear, especially when dealing with impactful or contentious projects, and explain how much room for change exists in the project and how much public feedback can shape the project at this stage.

Community partnerships develop and deepen over time and through thoughtful attention. Like any relationship, trust is formed by upholding values such as allowing for two-way communication, honesty, transparency and ensuring commitments are followed up in a timely manner.

Key recommendations from this chapter:

01	02
Effective community partnerships require initial and ongoing investment of time and energy. Sending ad-hoc requests for help in promoting TxDOT's public involvement opportunities to community groups/community leaders via email will rarely result in desired action.	Use the guidance provided in this chapter to identify potential community partners, establish initial communication, and build lasting relationships.

TxDOT provided staff and consultant teams with materials designed to help establish communication with potential community partners.

Looking Back and Planning for the Future

TxDOT created its public involvement team in April 2012 to better facilitate adherence to the Agency's Public Involvement (PI) Policy. This policy **commits to purposefully involving** the public in planning and project implementation and requires regular updates to public involvement methods.

TxDOT's PI team is **committed to continuous improvement** and strives to position TxDOT as a leader in public involvement nationwide. This team envisioned a new initiative to support the Agency's PI Policy.

Designed to evolve over time, the *Strategic Public Engagement Guidance* initiative, as envisioned by the PI team, set out to first address the need for **more complete and consistent guidance** that would equip TxDOT project teams with strategies and best practices for engaging all Texans.

This initiative featured a vision to deploy a detailed research and community engagement plan to support development of the initial guidance document. This **commitment to research** and community engagement would ensure the strategies, tools and techniques contained in the guidance are reflective of the needs of everyday Texans throughout the state and help the Agency take the next step to identify opportunities to enhance and focus our public engagement efforts.

The PI team gathered data on best practices through extensive research of published materials, coordinated with a multidisciplinary internal team, got feedback from representatives of 16 different state DOTs across the country, and **received 11,996 surveys** representing 224 of our state's 254 counties.

The result is this guidance document. This guidance is an embodiment of TxDOT's mission of *Connecting You With Texas* by strengthening the public's connection and transparency with the Agency's progress towards its goals to Deliver the right projects; Focus on the customer; Foster stewardship; Optimize system performance; Preserve our assets; Promote safety and Value our employees.

Our work with this guidance is not over; it's only just beginning. Deployment of this guidance will not only include TxDOT's internal team and consultants across the state but will be available to peer DOTs across the nation. Each peer DOT survey respondent shared that if they had access to a resource like this guide, they would use it. Research laid the foundation for this initiative and this guidance is only the first phase; we expect to continue to evolve this document to better respond to the needs of our project teams and the communities in which they work.

Additionally, we understand that the real work will happen through implementation. We are prepared to support our teams across the state through communication, supporting, and coordination as they bring the guidance outlined here to their communities. **Together, we can raise the bar for engagement of all Texas communities, which will ultimately result in greater trust and better projects.**

TxDOT's Public Involvement Section remains committed, as ever, to supporting you.

Scan the QR code to visit us online!

TxDOT would like to introduce the team that contributed to the development of this guidance.

Susan Howard in her role as TPP's Public Involvement Section lead and the driver behind the guidance.

Julie Beaubien in her role in leading strategy and reviews for the guidance.

Nicolle Kord in her role as a key reviewer for the guidance.

Members of TxDOT's working group in their role as strategic advisors for the guidance: **Angie Parker, Annabel Jurado, Danny Perez, Debra Medellin, Jennifer Adams, Jennifer Wright, John Callison, Linette Harris, Mark Sprick, Pedro Alvarez, Tracie Mendez, David Davalos, Adam Hammons and Michael Leary (FHWA).**

Dr. Lloyd Potter and Dr. Po-Chun Huang at the University of Texas at San Antonio in their leadership roles in the guidance's community survey.

Abby Tomlinson and her team at AECOM in their role in managing execution of all the guidance development components and in authoring and designing this guidance.

CONTACT US

https://www.txdot.gov/projects/planning/strategic-public-engagment-guidance.html

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