Chapter 7.0  Public Meetings and Public Hearings

Conducting public meetings or public hearings provide opportunities for stakeholders and the public to be heard, to discuss a project openly and candidly, and to enhance the decision-making process. Giving firsthand perspectives and having the ability to share and exchange information is what, to some degree, the majority of stakeholders and the public value. This enables District Environmental Staff, the Project Manager (PM), or the Project Management Team to understand the challenges that exist and the items to be addressed and resolved.

While public meetings are not required for Path 1, Path 2, and Non-Complex Path 3 projects, certain circumstances may warrant that one be conducted. The circumstances could range from impacts upon a business or historic district to minor controversy related to environmental reasons. For these types of projects, District Environmental Staff or the PM, are responsible for assessing the complexity of issues and ascertaining the need for a meeting.

Complex Path 3 and Path 4 and Path 5 projects have a greater potential to impact, alter or disrupt day-to-day activities and community cohesion. These higher level projects require a PI Plan, as well as a public meeting (Path 4 and Path 5 projects that are an EA [Environmental Assessment] or EIS [Environmental Impact Statement] will require a public hearing).

For the majority of projects, only a small percentage of the public will provide comments in advance of or attend a public meeting or public hearing. Therefore, District Environmental Staff, the PM, or the Project Management Team have the responsibility to ensure the PI process is as comprehensive as practicable.

7.1  Preparation

Depending on a project’s type and complexity, a Public Involvement (PI) Plan may be needed to guide the preparation and management of public meetings and public hearings. It is important to note that the majority of projects will not require a public meeting. Depending on a project’s type and complexity, public notifications or conducting PI activities on a smaller scale may be sufficient. However, for those projects that necessitate a public meeting or public hearing, it is imperative that the event be tailored to meet the needs of the anticipated audience. While the majority of preparation activities discussed in this chapter may be initiated early in the PDP, certain activities may need to be refined or duplicated to correspond with efforts related to conducting a public meeting or public hearing. Depending on a project’s type and complexity, typically 10-14 weeks of planning is recommended to ensure a proper meeting location is identified and reserved, materials are developed on time, and timely public notification takes place. To further assist District Environmental Staff, the PM, or the Project Management Team, a sample preparation checklist is provided in Appendix E.
7.1.1  **Strategy Meetings**

Establishing periodic strategy meetings may be beneficial for Complex Path 3, and Path 4 and Path 5 projects. Strategy meetings are designed to direct and assist the Project Management Team to ensure PI procedures are implemented properly and that PI goals and objectives are met. Instituting strategy meetings at the onset of a project can lead to a comprehensive and successful decision-making process, reduce miscommunication with stakeholders and the public, and reduce sharing of incorrect information.

Below are topic areas that can be discussed during a Strategy Meeting:

**PI Plan Review**
- Are the identified procedures, methods, techniques, activities, still applicable?
- Are modifications needed?

**Format**
- The type of format (e.g. open house with open mic) and event organization (e.g. agenda) is dependent on a project’s type and complexity, as well as the project’s geographic location
  - What format will appropriately meet the purpose of conducting the meeting?
  - What format is suitable for the intended audience?
  - Is a higher level of PI needed?
  - Does controversy exist?
- Adapt format for a specific purpose
  - Is the goal to inform, obtain input, or gain consensus?
  - Why is the event being held?
  - Who is the intended audience?

**Project Management Team Roles and Responsibilities**
- Who will attend?
- Who will be presenting?
- Who will be available to answer questions?
- Who will moderate?
- Who will manage exhibit/display stations, registration table, comment table, etc.?
- Who is responsible for publicity?

**Venue Identification**
- Follow site selection process (see 7.1.5)
- Determine appropriate time of day and day of the week
  - Tuesday or Thursdays are typically best
  - Conducting a public meeting or public hearing anytime between the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. can help maximize attendance
- Accessible, convenient, centralized, comfortable (e.g. A/C and heat), and safe
- ADA compliant
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• Ample parking (no fee)
• Close proximity to public transportation (e.g. bus stop)
• Can facilitate the event format (e.g. display stations, presentations, etc.)

Displays, Exhibits, Handouts, and Other Materials Needed

• Avoid technical terms, jargon, and acronyms
• Legible and easy to read
• Clean and not cluttered with symbols, lines, or multiple overlays

Develop an outreach strategy for EJ and Title VI

• Involve community stakeholders in identifying the best methods for involvement

Determine appropriate method(s) of notification

• Press Release, Public Service Announcements (PSA), Mailings, Fliers
• Determine pertinent information to convey to participants
• Determine when notification will occur (e.g. 15 days prior to meeting, etc.)
  ○ Develop an advertising strategy
  ○ Ask the District PIO for assistance

Establish weekly or bi-weekly strategy meetings

• Reduces misinformation and provides updates
• Ensures materials are developed and printed
• Opportunity for dry-run presentations for preparation purposes
• Evaluation and debriefing (e.g. what went wrong, effectiveness, etc.)
• Addressing comments and providing responses

7.1.2 Public Information Officer (PIO)

A PIO is the primary communications coordinator or spokesperson for the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) whose responsibility is to convey information related to transportation programs or projects to news media and the public. A PIO can facilitate in the dissemination of project information and public notifications for Complex Path 3, and Path 4 and Path 5 projects through a variety of strategies. The majority of communication strategies rely on using news media, social media, and other outlets to relay critical and time sensitive information to the public. On Complex Path 3, and Path 4 and Path 5 projects, the potential for media involvement is higher. Therefore, it is recommended that the Project Management Team involve the PIO.

The PIO is an asset on higher level projects as established relationships typically exist with news organizations and other media outlets. Although a PIO primarily focuses on working with local and regional news media, a PIO can assist in developing communication strategies to inform the public about upcoming projects, project status updates, or other PI activities (e.g. public meeting). A PIO can also assist District Environmental Staff, the PM, or the Project Management Team (as needed) in properly responding to comments received from the public.
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7.1.2 Stakeholder Identification

For projects that are or become high profile or controversial, it may be beneficial to invite influential community leaders that support the project or may represent the community or a particular group. These advocates can be instrumental in providing assurances to the public that they personally have been involved and part of the decision-making process from the beginning and have advocated particular issues on their behalf. Furthermore, District Environmental Staff, the PM, or the Project Management Team will need to be aware of and invite stakeholders not previously identified or that express an interest to be a stakeholder during later phases of the PDP.

7.1.3 Stakeholder Meetings

For projects that are or become high profile or controversial, stakeholders can be afforded the opportunity to provide feedback on what will be presented to the public. This will enable District Environmental Staff, the PM, or the Project Management Team to gain perspective on issues or challenges that may arise as the project progresses. Meeting with stakeholders is instrumental if obtaining their buy-in is critical to the success of a project.

There may be benefit to conducting a stakeholder meeting on the same day of the public meeting or public hearing for preparation or debriefing purposes. However, depending on circumstances surrounding a project, it may be beneficial to hold the stakeholder meeting several days in advance.

7.1.4 Public Notifications

Information regarding the purpose of the public meeting or public hearing, along with date, time and location should be clearly conveyed. Informing the public can occur through multiple media outlets. The Project Management Team has the responsibility to determine the proper means of notification based on the type of project, specific circumstances surrounding a project, and project area demographics.

A PIO can provide guidance and assistance in disseminating public notifications and is essential to include during strategy meetings. All notifications must include how members of the public can ask that reasonable accommodations be provided, in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and revised regulations of 2008 and 2010. Public meeting notifications are provided a minimum of 15 calendar days in advance. If circumstances prevent less than the minimum accepted time frame, the meeting will need to be rescheduled.
Notifications can include, but are not limited to:

- Press Release
- Social Media
- Print advertisements
- Public Service Announcement (PSA)
- Direct mailings
- Fliers, Brochures, and Newsletters

Multiple approaches, depending on the PDP Path, can be used to notify the public:

- Distribute information to businesses within the project area
  - Request that it be posted in break rooms or near high activity areas
  - Send a PDF of the flier to Human Resources for employee e-mail distribution
- Distribute information to churches, social service providers, and community groups/organizations within the project area
  - Request that it be included in bulletins, newsletters or other means of communication
- Send project information home with school children
  - Permission must be obtained from the school Superintendent
- Direct mailings to all addresses in the project area
- Distribution of fliers at local venues (see 7.3.6)

Advertisements via print or news media for a public meeting are dependent on a project’s type and complexity. This type of notification is typically used for Path 4 and Path 5 projects. As other means may be more practical, advertisements are an option for Path 1, Path 2, and Non-Complex and Complex Path 3 projects.

- Not a Legal Advertisement
  - This is only required for Public Hearings
- Determine pertinent information, size, layout, graphics etc.
- Can be cost prohibitive

### 7.1.5 Venue

When conducting a public meeting or public hearing, a proper location must be selected that meets the below criteria:

- The venue can accommodate the selected format and anticipated attendance
  - If the purpose is to simply provide information, a gymnasium, auditorium, or large space may be adequate
  - If a variety of information is to be provide with the purpose of receiving feedback, a venue large enough to accommodate multiple workstations and seating will be needed
  - If a large crowd is expected, find a venue with enough space to set up two identical sets of workstations that allow adequate movement
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- A quality sound system, including microphones, is available
  - If not, a quality portable system will be required
- The venue’s operating hours can accommodate early arrival for set-up purposes and will not restrict the time needed to hold the meeting or tear down
- On-site parking
  - Lighted
  - No parking fee
- The venue is in compliance with the American with Disabilities Act of 1990
  - Accessible parking and accessible entrance
  - All public events must be made accessible to everyone including persons with sight, hearing or mobility disabilities.
- Availability of a custodian, property manager, administrator, etc, during the meeting for emergency and/or clean-up purposes
- Public facilities should be used after normal business hours to avoid conflicts to parking, congestion, interruptions, etc.
  - Schools, Colleges/Universities, Government Buildings

7.1.6 Displays, Exhibits, and Handouts

All materials should be project relevant and presented in a manner that is easy for the public to understand. Include mapping of the proposed project area with a project boundary overlay and provide basic information (e.g. project timeline, project description, etc.) as handouts. Displays should be placed at several stations around the room and should focus on various aspects of the project that were selected as being pertinent to convey.

For example, at a public meeting designed to obtain input on a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), copies should be made available at several stations. Other stations may highlight major design features, right-of-way and property impacts, and environmental impacts. Sample room layouts are provided in Appendix E.

Below are format guidelines for handouts:

- Easy to comprehend and reader friendly
- Use graphics to communicate the message
- Use tables and bullet points to highlight information
- Avoid use of technical jargon and terms
- Include project location mapping
- State the purpose of the meeting or hearing
- Purpose and Need synopsis
- Project Description
- Environmental Impacts
  - Highlight pending, current or completed studies and investigations
  - Highlight pending, current, or completed coordination
  - Include resource location mapping, as appropriate
• Design Considerations
• Project Schedule
• Next Steps in Decision-Making Process
• Indicate “How you can get involved and participate”
• Project Sponsor Contact Information

7.1.7 Presentations

Presentations are an effective and organized method of conveying key information and addressing community concerns and issues. The majority of projects that have presentations are typically Complex Path 3’s and Path 4 and Path 5 Projects (higher level CEs, Environmental Assessments [EA], and Environmental Impact Statements [EIS]). Presentations may incorporate a wide variety of methods, means, and techniques to enable the audience to be engaged and understand the information being given.

7.1.8 Developing Ground Rules

While members of the public are encouraged to share their views and opinions (especially at public meetings that integrate open mic), establishing ground rules will help to guide and ensure the public meeting or public hearing is held in a timely fashion without major interruptions or incidents. Ground rules can be introduced as the beginning of a meeting by either the PM or the assigned moderator/facilitator.

Standard ground rules can include, but are not limited to:

• Establishing time limits (as needed or if an open mic is conducted)
• Be respectful and considerate to the opinions of others
• Be considerate of the time allocated for others to speak
• Demeaning and derogatory words or actions may result in attendee being asked to leave

7.1.9 Decision-Making Process

As part of public meetings or public hearings, provide a graphic or handout that illustrates the decision-making process, who is involved, and at what role the public will be have and how their input will affect the final outcome.

• Identify decision-makers (e.g. project sponsor, lead agency)
• Who makes recommendations and/or is consulted prior to a decision being made
• How recommendations and comments will be transmitted to decision-makers, stakeholders and the public
• The criteria or factors used to finalize decisions
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7.2 Public Meetings

A public meeting is an effective way to provide detailed information to the public about a planned project during the early phases of the PDP.

The goals of a public meeting are to:

- Educate and inform the public
- Receive input
- Engage in dialogue
- Build consensus
- Consider modifications and/or other alternatives needed as a result of input

Public meetings provide an opportunity for personal interaction and two-way communication that can be instrumental in breaking down barriers - real or perceived - between the public and the project sponsor and/or transportation agencies. This type of setting allows stakeholders, the public, and sponsoring and regulatory agencies a chance to respond directly to comments and dispel rumors or misinformation. Public meetings are intended to be interactive occasions for discussing issues and hearing opposing viewpoints.

Depending on the context and need, public meetings can either be formal or informal and may involve the attendance of large or small community groups. Typically, most public meetings are structured as a traditional open house format with presentation. There are other alternative forms of meetings that may be appropriate based upon complex issues, substantial controversy or the need to reach out to non-traditional groups within the community.

Projects with a high level of complexity and impacts (Complex Path 3 and Path 4 and Path 5 projects) may require one or two Open House Public Meetings early in the process, prior to holding a formal public meeting. The goal is to inform stakeholders and the public early and often, and afford opportunities to provide input as the project is being developed.

Public meetings typically take place during the Preliminary Engineering Phase of the PDP and may be needed in later phases (e.g. Environmental Engineering Phase). This provides an opportunity to formally introduce a project to the public and to present feasible alternatives (or a preferred alternative), environmental impacts, relocations, etc. and to integrate input obtained from the public into the decision-making process.

It should be noted that existing regulations do not dictate a prescribed format to follow for every project. Rather, public meetings are structured as appropriate to the needs of the public and to the type of project. The key is to be inclusive of all community segments and to ensure sufficient opportunity for involvement. To that end, there are alternative formats of public meetings that can be used in lieu of, or in addition to, the traditional or formal meeting (see 7.2.3 and 7.2.4).
7.2.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups are typically initiated for Path 4 and Path 5 projects early during the Planning Phase and can be held concurrently with stakeholder meetings. This type of meeting is designed to solicit input from stakeholders and residents from specific areas within the surrounding project area. Depending on project circumstances, several focus groups may be needed.

Characteristics of a focus group include:

- Small groups that consist of 15-20 people
- Designed to gauge public opinion and perspective on community values, needs, expectations, and concerns
- Facilitated agenda that focuses on four or five main topics
  - HOV lanes, transit, access, economic development
- Interactive and involves open dialogue
- Identification of major points of agreement and disagreement
- Minimal presentation of project plans, purpose, etc. to avoid preconceived notions that decisions have been made

Individuals selected to participate can be a combination of stakeholders and the public. Depending on the goals to be achieved, a focus group can be comprised of a variety of individuals or groups, including area residents, businesses and institutions. The purpose of the focus group is clearly defined beforehand and the agenda created will be commensurate with the needs of the project.

This activity is typically led by a professional facilitator that is a PI Subject Matter Expert (SME) with experience leading transportation focus groups. The facilitator guides discussion of all agenda items and assures all individuals get a chance to respond, especially those that may want to react to opinions expressed or discuss their own ideas.

The facilitator is essential to keep the group focused and on task, elicit opinions from each participant, and keep a single participant from dominating the proceedings. The PM and the Project Management Team will advise the facilitator on the purpose of the focus group to assure all topics get equitable attention.

7.2.2 Workshops

This type of meeting includes a presentation of the project followed by interaction between the project management team and stakeholders, residents, interest groups, businesses, etc. Workshops are often initiated for large and/or complex Path 4 and Path 5 (CE Level 4 and EA/EIS) projects, to gain perspective from stakeholders, interest groups, and the public. Workshops can be useful in resolving issues and/or impasses that exist between groups as part of the Planning and/or Environmental Engineering Phase.
Workshops are designed to:

- Define and resolve issues and address concerns
- Be interactive
- Facilitate discussions, promote ownership, and defuse negative opinions or controversy
- Develop alternative approaches to solutions
- Build consensus

The success of workshops relies on extensive preparation by the project management team. A workshop can be conducted as part of a public meeting or a stand-alone vehicle for direct interaction.

The purpose of conducting a workshop is to call attention to issues that need to be resolved in order to avoid substantial delays to a project. Facilitation of the workshop is a collaborative effort between the Project Management Team and one or more professional facilitators.

A wide range of individuals and/or interest groups (including stakeholders and the public) with differing interests are invited. Typically, participants represent organized groups, but individuals with a stake in the project or a particular issue are encouraged to attend.

Having experienced facilitators lead workshops ensures a range of views are incorporated and that all participants will be given the opportunity to participate freely without fear of rebuke or ridicule. Experienced facilitators help keep the workshops focused and organized, and know how to handle group dynamics or controversial items.

Incorporating graphics and materials that illustrate issues and problems surrounding the project will support the workshop’s goal of problem-solving and finding alternative solutions, as needed. A workshop can occur at any phase, as needed, of the PDP. Advance work can take a month or more, depending on the issues to be discussed. Workshop materials are tailored to meet the goals and objectives of the workshop.

Workshops may only need to be 2-3 hours, however, some can be day-long events, so plan accordingly when choosing a centralized location. Workshops are best held in public, neutral and convenient sites. Since workshops can be broken into smaller groups, several rooms should be accessible to the participating members, if needed. Attendees are typically arranged at tables to encourage small group discussion and allows each table to report out as a group on the topic they have been assigned.
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7.2.3 Open House Public Meeting

Circumstances surrounding a project may warrant an Open House Public Meeting format on Path 1, Path 2, and Non-Complex Path 3 projects. Open House Public Meetings do not require a formal agenda, presentation or open mic. Furthermore, this type of public meeting can be used for a Complex Path 3 and Path 4 and Path 5 projects as an initial way to formally introduce a project and obtain feedback.

Elements of an Open House Public Meeting include:

**Welcome Table**
- Handouts
  - Agenda, Fact Sheets, etc
- Sign-in sheet
- Project Management Team contact information/business cards
- Sign-up sheet for project e-mail updates, newsletters, etc.

**Exhibit/Display Stations**
- Project History/Purpose and Need
- Feasible Alternatives or the Preferred Alternative
- Impacts Matrix
- Before and after pictures, artists renderings, etc.
- Project timeline and decision-making process chart that shows next steps, etc.
- Project management team member located at each station
  - Wear identification/nametag (e.g. name, company, agency)

**Slide show/video loop**
- Depiction of how a proposed improvement will operate (e.g. roundabouts, Diverging Diamond Interchange (DDI), a free flow intersection, or other type of improvement)
- Illustrates proposed improvements

**Comment Box**
- Located in a separate area near the entrance or near exhibit/display stations
- Comment forms must include contact information and address for return by mail
  - Contact person can be District Environmental Coordinator (DEC) or PM
  - Include date comments must be submitted by
    - Standard comment period is 30 calendar days
- Comment forms should include space for the commenter to provide contact information
- Comment forms can be made available on a dedicated project website
Open House Public Meeting attendees receive project information via exhibits, displays, handouts, slideshow, or video display. This format allows attendees to review all materials at their leisure, ask questions and discuss the issues with the Project Management Team. This type of casual, low-key environmental is designed to encourage attendees to provide input orally or submit comments.

Typically, there is no formal agenda and this type of public meeting can be held for 3-4 hours during the day/evening to maximize opportunities for the public to attend at a time convenient for them. The times of the open house should accommodate shift changes, rush hour, family meal times, etc. (e.g. 3:00 pm – 7:00 pm).

### 7.2.4 Formal Public Meeting

Complex Path 3, and Path 4 and Path 5 projects may warrant a more elevated style of presenting project information. A Formal Public Meeting is more structured, offers attendees the opportunity to present their comments and opinions in front of their peers, and be more engaged in one-on-one conversations with the Project Management Team. This type of meeting is typically held for large and complex projects that may have multiple impacts that will affect a potentially wide audience. Furthermore, this format can assist in managing and reducing opposition, controversy, and misinformation. Presenting the project in this format will enable the Project Management Team to monitor reactions, understand opinions, and strengthen partnerships.

Elements include:

**Welcome Table**
- Handouts
  - Agenda, Fact Sheets, etc
- Sign-in sheet(s)
- Open Mic registration
- Project Management Team contact information/business cards
- Sign-up for project e-mail updates or newsletters

**Exhibit/Display Stations**
- Project History/Purpose and Need
- Feasible Alternatives or the Preferred Alternative
- Impacts Matrix
- Before and after pictures, artists renderings, etc.
- Project timeline
- Decision-making process chart that shows next steps
- Each station staffed by members of the Project Management Team
  - Wear identification/nametag (e.g. name, company, agency)
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**Slide show and/or video loop**
- Depiction of how a proposed improvement will operate (e.g. roundabouts, Diverging Diamond Interchange (DDI), a free flow intersection, or other type of improvement)
- Illustrates proposed improvements

**Presentation**
- Style of presentation depends on the anticipated audience and the project’s type and complexity

**Open Mic**
- Provide ground rules as a handout and post around the meeting room in visible locations
- Reiterate as part of the presentation
- Guidelines on how and when to incorporate Open Mic are found in Appendix E

**Comment Box**
- In a separate area near the entrance or near exhibits/displays
- Comment forms must include contact information and address for return by mail
  - Contact person can be the District Environmental Coordinator (DEC) or the PM
  - Include date comments must be submitted by
  - Standard comment period is 30 calendar days
- Comment forms should include space for the commenter to provide contact information
- Comment forms can be made available on a dedicated project website

A Formal Public Meeting follows a structured format that begins and ends at a pre-determined time, includes a presentation by the project management team, and provides an Open Mic session during which participants can provide comments and propose questions. The District/project sponsor may choose to answer questions at that time or may defer responses and answer them in writing later. Due to the structured approach an agenda is created to maximize the time allotted.

If an Open Mic is part of the program, rules and guidelines will be:
- Distributed as part of advanced meeting notifications
- Handed out at the welcome table when attendees register
- Posted around the meeting room

### 7.3 Public Hearings

A public hearing is a formal proceeding designed to meet specific timeframes and criteria in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).
Public hearings are required by federal law for transportation projects when:

- Significant amounts of right-of-way are required
- The layout or functions of connecting roadways or of the facility being improved are substantially changed
- A substantial adverse impact on abutting property will occur
- Significant social, economic, environmental or other impacts will occur
- FHWA determines that a hearing is in the public interest

Public hearings will not be the only opportunity to involve the public on EA or EIS projects. These types of projects will have public meetings conducted throughout different intervals of the PDP as part of the decision-making process. The public hearing is the official point in the NEPA process where decisions made for the project are shared with stakeholders and the public, and whose comments concerning the project will be part of the public record. Much of what is shared during the public hearing has been developed with stakeholder and public input during early phases of the PDP.

In Ohio, public hearings are held for all EA and EIS projects, and are conducted prior to a decision-making point (e.g. Finding of No Significant Impact [FONSI]). The primary differences between a public hearing and a public meeting are:

- Specific timeframes and requirements associated with advertising, public notices, and the submittal of written comments
- An official court stenographer/recorder and transcription of testimony is required
- Public hearings are held at the end of the NEPA process
- Stipulated regulations at 23 CFR 771 for public hearings

### 7.3.1 Notification of Public Hearings

Public notifications for a public hearing must be advertised in one or two area newspapers (or other media outlets) at a minimum of 15 days (but no more than 30 days) prior to the date of the hearing. Common practice also includes reminding the public through the same or different means two to three days in advance. The environmental document (EA or EIS) must be made available to the public two weeks prior to the public hearing.

The advertisement includes:

- A map of the proposed project alignment
- Reason for conducting the public hearing
- Explanation of the format
- Project Description
- Date, time and location
• Include the following statement: **Public participation is solicited without regard to race, color, national origin, age, sex, or disability.** Persons who require special accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or persons who require translation services or sign language interpreters should contact __________ at least 15 calendar days prior to the public hearing. Public participation is solicited without regard to race, color, sex, age, national origin, or disability.

• Provide mailing address where written comments can be sent

• State that a 30 day comment period will begin after the public hearing is held or when the environmental document was made available and indicate where the public can obtain or view project information

### 7.3.2 Public Hearing Format

Depending on the circumstances surrounding a project, the Project Management Team will determine a format that is best suited to advancing project goals and objectives, as well as which format will encourage and provide the best opportunities for stakeholders and the public to participate. A transcript of all proceedings which includes presentations, all testimony received, and all handouts, materials, and exhibits and displays used is required for EA and EIS projects.

This format typically:

• Follows a structured and timed agenda

• Is led by a moderator/facilitator

• Starts in late afternoon (e.g. 4:00 pm) and ends in the evening (e.g. 8:00 pm)

• Is held in a large conference room or auditorium

• Affords the public time to comment on the project via an Open Mic

• Has multiple exhibit/display stations around the meeting space
  - *Right-of-way impacts, relocations, noise, environmental impacts, etc.*
  - *Each station staffed by members of the Project Management Team*

• Includes short and periodic presentations delivered throughout the course of the hearing to ensure all attendees have an opportunity to be present

Elements include:

**Welcome Table**

• Handouts
  - *Agenda*
  - *Open Mic Rules*
  - *Project Fact Sheet*
  - *Project location mapping*

• Sign-in sheet

• Open Mic registration

• Project Management Team contact information/business cards

• Sign-up for project e-mail updates, newsletters, etc.
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Exhibit/Display Stations

- Purpose and Need/Project History
- Preferred Alternative
- Impacts Matrix
- Before and after pictures, artists renderings, etc.
- Project timeline
- Decision-making process chart that shows next steps
- Each station staffed by members of the Project Management Team
  - Wear identification/nametag (e.g. name, company, agency)

Comment Box

- In a separate area near the entrance or near exhibits/displays
- Comment forms must include contact information and address for return by mail
  - Contact person is typically District Environmental Coordinator (DEC) or PM
  - Include date comments must be submitted by
  - Standard comment period is 30 calendar days
- Comment forms should include space for the commenter to provide contact information
- Comment forms can be made available on a project website

Slide show and/or video loop

- Depiction of how a proposed improvement will operate (e.g. roundabouts, Diverging Diamond Interchange (DDI), a free flow intersection, or other type of improvement)
- Show what the proposed improvements will look like

Presentation

- Style of presentation depends on the anticipated audience and the project’s type and complexity

Open Mic

- Can begin with a presentation and Q&A and then lead into the formal hearing aspect
- Depending on the nature of the project, existing controversy, and attendees anticipated, the open mic period may require time restrictions
- The order of hearing comments and time limits should be set and made known to the public during registration or during the formal presentation
- Depending on the number of speakers, enforcing time restrictions during the open mic period will be at the discretion of the moderator/facilitator

Ground Rules (includes Open Mic)

- Provided as a handout
- Posted around the venue in visible locations
- Reiterated as part of a presentation
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A Public Hearing must afford the opportunity for the public to give comments and have them addressed by representatives of the Project Management Team following the presentation. An official court reporter is present so that a verbatim transcript can be made part of the project record following the proceedings. All verbal and written comments received, presentation materials, exhibits, displays, and handouts received become part of the official project record.

7.4 Documentation

Federal regulations require that all documentation for PI activities conducted during NEPA become part of a project’s environmental document. All materials developed for a specific PI activity, as well as comments received and responses to those comments, are kept. Documenting PI activities is critical to not only illustrate that legal requirements were met, but to demonstrate how the decision-making process was relayed to and/or influenced by stakeholders and the public. Additionally, complete documentation of PI activities creates a history of interacting with stakeholders and the public and how their concerns were addressed and/or considered, and any commitments made as a result.

The following items are typically part of PI documentation:

- Meeting notifications
- Press Releases
- Advertisements
- News Articles
- Printed materials
- Attendee sign-in sheets for all events
- Copies of exhibits and/or displays
  - PDF or word document
- All comments and correspondence received, including responses
  - Written and verbal
- Summary of PI activities for large and complex projects.

7.4.1 Public Comments

The most common way for the public to provide ideas, arguments, or opposition to a project is through written or verbal comments. Depending on the scope of the PI plan, as well as the level of controversy or interest surrounding a project, a large volume of comments may be generated. Therefore, developing a protocol of how comments are submitted and responded will be advantageous to District Environmental Staff, the PM, or the Project Management Team.
The purpose of soliciting public comments is to:

- Understand alternate perspectives and community values
- Understand real and/or perceived impacts a project will create
- Identify transportation needs to address
- Understand which transportation solutions will fit community needs
- Make informed decisions as a project advances through the PDP

Developing a protocol for collecting and responding to public comments can include:

**Submittal of Comments**

Comments can be collected at any time during the decision-making process using a variety of methods that include, but are not limited to:

- Survey
- Comment forms
- Letter
- Telephone
- Email

**Review and Analysis**

To help manage this task, comments can be sorted into four categories:

- General
  - Support or oppose a project
  - No facts or reason to substantiate opinions
- Procedural
  - Related specifically to decision-making process, NEPA procedures or PI process
- Project Specific
  - Relates to project planning and development, request for additional project information/data, or is environmental resource specific
- Other
  - Non-project/non-NEPA specific comments (e.g. corruption, waste of taxpayer dollars)

**Acknowledgement and Response**

Responding to comments that specifically support a project or provide substantive criticism and legitimate opposition will encourage individuals and/or groups to continue to be proactively involved. Furthermore, providing proper responses that sincerely acknowledge their concerns will help facilitate future communication and build trust and credibility. A complete answer to all issues raised should be provided, as well as providing an explanation of any research or analysis that forms the basis of the answer. Include information explaining how the individual can continue to be involved in the decision making process and what next steps are anticipated.
A best practice is to provide a response within 15 calendar days of receiving the comment. Depending on the comments, the response may only require a simple acknowledgement and thank you, while others may require detailed information or feedback that may take time to analyze and research. In those instances, it is important to contact the individual and/or group to inform them their response was received, but that time is needed to research and answer their comment appropriately. The public is usually willing to wait for an answer as long as they know their comment was received and is being considered.

- Public Meeting Report
  - Chronological or Categorized
    - Document comments by date they are received
    - Document comments by type of response
      - General, Procedural, Project Specific, Other
  - Assign a tracking number for large, complex, or controversial projects

- Summary
  - Create a summary report that includes number of comments received and a brief synopsis of key issues raised, along with responses provided.

- Compilation of Comments for Public Viewing
  - After each PI activity and public meeting or public hearing, comments received and corresponding response is shared with stakeholders and the public
  - Distribution can be in the form of a newsletter, email, posted on the project website, or other appropriate means

7.5 Continuing Public Involvement

As part of the PI Plan, determine what activities will be needed once the environmental document has been approved and the project proceeds through the Final Engineering and Construction Phases. Keep in mind, this approach may need to be modified as the project progresses. It is important that PI continue after the environmental document is approved, as the public and stakeholders will be interested in progress and any changes that may result. This is paramount especially if there is controversy or individuals/groups in opposition to the project.