

Hampton Roads Public Involvement Procedure: Evaluation of Public Involvement Activities



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HAMPTON ROADS PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCEDURE

EVALUATION OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES



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ABSTRACT

An integral part of the Hampton Roads Public Involvement Procedure is an ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the various Public Involvement Activities outlined in the procedure document. This document includes evaluations of HRPDC public meetings, the HRPDC newsletter, the HRPDC web site, and the transportation kiosk project. In addition, some new activities under consideration by HRPDC staff are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The **Hampton Roads Public Involvement Procedure** (PIP), revised and approved by the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (HRPDC) in September 2003, details a variety of strategies and activities to involve the public in regional transportation planning and programming. Current PIP activities include:

1. Public Meetings and Listening Sessions
2. The *Hampton Roads Review*, the HRPDC's Quarterly Newsletter
3. The HRPDC Web Site
4. The Transportation Kiosks
5. The HRPDC Library
6. Video Productions on Selected Topics
7. Personal Appearances by HRPDC Staff
8. Direct Contact with the Public

An integral part of the PIP is an ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the various activities. This document focuses on items one through four above, as they can be quantitatively evaluated. In addition, a literature search on best public involvement practices has been performed and additional strategies and activities aimed at improving public involvement in the transportation planning process will be discussed.

REPORT ORGANIZATION

This report is organized into sections on each of the four activities being evaluated. In addition, **New Activities** includes PIP activities that may be considered for implementation and **Conclusions** summarizes the primary findings of the evaluation.

PUBLIC MEETINGS AND LISTENING SESSIONS

Public meetings held by the HRPDC are primarily associated with the development of the long-range Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). Staff strives to ensure that the meeting places and times are convenient to the public. In addition, sites are chosen that meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and, when possible, are selected along public transit routes. The meetings are advertised in three local newspapers, in the HRPDC newsletter, and on the HRPDC web site. The meetings have been well-represented by transportation officials, including those from the HRPDC, the Virginia Department of Transportation, the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, Hampton Roads Transit, Williamsburg Area Transport, the Virginia Port Authority, the Federal Highway Administration, and the localities.

Citizen turnout at HRPDC public meetings has historically been low. It has been observed that it is more difficult to capture the interest of the public over a 20-year plan than it is to get their attention when groundbreaking on a project is imminent. Several public meetings and hearings are held each year by VDOT and the localities. These meetings usually concern projects with much shorter time horizons than the RTP and often attract a significant portion of the public for review and comment. The HRPDC PIP includes these opportunities for public comment by incorporating the meeting notices and some statistics on attendance, as available from VDOT or the localities, into the HRPDC Documentation Compendium.

Over the years, HRPDC staff has experimented with the way the meetings are advertised and conducted in the interest of improving attendance. The two most recent series of public meetings were the **Transportation Listening Sessions** held in December 2002 and the **Transportation – A Vision for the Future** meetings held in September 2003. The meetings in both series were of the *open house* format to allow for ample one-on-one contact between transportation officials and the public.

Transportation Listening Sessions

The Listening Sessions of December 2002 were held in Hampton on December 11 and in Chesapeake on December 16. The meetings were held near the mid-point of the planning cycle for the 2026 RTP. By that time in the cycle, HRPDC and locality staffs had completed enough analyses to develop a list of candidate projects to be considered for inclusion in the RTP. The Listening Sessions provided the public with an opportunity to express their preferences for various candidate projects or to suggest other projects to be added to the candidate list.

HRPDC staff developed a large, eye-catching ad for placement in the local newspapers. The meetings were held from 3 PM to 9 PM at each of the locations to accommodate citizens that prefer to attend meetings during the day and those that attend after normal office hours. The Hampton meeting drew 41 individuals; the Chesapeake meeting drew 106. All of the attendees arrived between 3 and 7 PM. It

should be noted that the Listening Sessions were held shortly after the defeat of the Transportation Referendum for Hampton Roads, so the attention directed toward the transportation system in Hampton Roads was still fresh in citizens' minds.

Transportation – A Vision for the Future

In an effort to attract more attendees by making meeting locations more convenient to the public, the meetings in this series were held in five different localities during September 2003. The meetings were held in Virginia Beach on the 4th, Newport News on the 8th, Suffolk on the 10th, James City County on the 11th, and Norfolk on the 15th.

These five meetings were held near the end of the planning cycle for the 2026 RTP and presented the public with a draft RTP for review and comment. By this time in the cycle, HRPDC and locality staffs had taken into account public comments received during and after the Listening Sessions and 20-year revenue estimates to distill the list of candidate projects down to a final, financially-constrained list of transportation improvement projects. Comments received during these meetings were reviewed and considered prior to final approval of the 2026 RTP by the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO).

The newspaper ads notifying the public of these five meetings were relatively large and conspicuously placed in the local section of each newspaper. The meetings were held from 3 to 7 PM at each of the locations. Attendance at each meeting location was as follows: Virginia Beach – 11, Newport News – 20, Suffolk – 7, James City County – 17, and Norfolk – 5. All of the attendees arrived between 3 and 6 PM.

Effectiveness

Staff has struggled over the years to improve attendance at the public meetings, but that goal has thus far been elusive. Holding more meetings in more locations did not increase attendance substantially – nor did holding meetings at later hours in the evening. A review of PIP activities of other MPOs across the country revealed similar problems regarding low attendance at public meetings.

Citizen turnout at public meetings held by the HRPDC over the last ten years typically ranged from 0 to 10 people for any given meeting. Notable exceptions were the meetings held in May 1997 (151 attendees), December 2002 (147 attendees), and September 2003 (60 attendees). It should be noted, however, that the May 1997 meeting was held in conjunction with a VDOT public hearing on the Hampton Roads Crossing Draft Major Investment Study and, as mentioned earlier, the December 2002 meeting came one month after the defeat of the Transportation Referendum for Hampton Roads.

Even the unusually high attendance figures in May 1997 and December 2002 are far from enough to provide a good representation of the concerns and thoughts of the

general public in Hampton Roads. It would be virtually impossible to attract enough citizens to the meetings to provide such a representation. In addition, the people that do attend public meetings often have personal issues regarding particular projects or types of projects and do not usually provide an objective viewpoint. Since public meetings cannot provide statistically-valid findings, it would be considered imprudent for regional planners to change plans developed through months of working closely with state and local planning staffs based solely on the comments of the few people that attend the meetings.

Although the HRPDC staff will continue to strive to increase the effectiveness of the public meetings, due to the inherent weaknesses of such meetings to provide substantial public involvement, much of the staff's focus will be on researching, developing, and testing other PIP activities that may turn out to be much more effective. The following sections of this report describe some current PIP activities that have shown much greater effectiveness than public meetings and some new ideas being considered to improve public involvement in regional planning in Hampton Roads.

NEWSLETTER

The ***Hampton Roads Review*** is the quarterly newsletter published by the HRPDC. The newsletter includes informative articles from the various departments of the HRPDC in addition to a calendar of events and meetings. A special transportation insert provides recipients of the newsletter with updates and status reports on various transportation programs.

Effectiveness

The most recent version of the newsletter was mailed to 2,546 addressees. The breakdown of recipients was as follows:

- 724 to Civic Leagues, Homeowners Associations, etc.
- 1,017 to Private Addresses. These include businesses, churches, and individuals
- 805 to Addressees including:
 - o The Chambers of Commerce in Hampton Roads
 - o Public Officials in Hampton Roads localities
 - o State and Federal Transportation Officials
 - o The Local Media

In terms of measuring effectiveness, the newsletter is primarily a vehicle for providing information to the public and there are currently no means in place with which to gauge the public's response or action as a result of receiving the newsletter. HRPDC staff plans to begin keeping a PIP call log that would include what the citizen is calling in reference to; i.e. an article in the newsletter or other printed media, a report on the television or radio, etc., which may help quantify the effectiveness of the newsletter.

For comparison purposes, staff contacted six MPOs of similar population size to Hampton Roads and requested information on the number of addressees on their newsletter mailing lists. Their responses were as follows:

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| • Columbus, OH | 8,000 for newsletter; 1,900 for e-newsletter |
| • Indianapolis, IN | 2,370 for newsletter |
| • Milwaukee, WI | 3,000 for newsletter |
| • Portland, OR | Does not mail out general newsletter; 5,315 for e-newsletter |
| • Sacramento, CA | 4,000 for newsletter; 4,000 for e-newsletter |
| • San Antonio, TX | 775 for newsletter; 275 for e-newsletter |

None of the above MPOs are actively increasing the number of addressees on their mailing lists. Sacramento and San Antonio are actually attempting to reduce the number of addressees on the regular mailing list and are encouraging the use of the e-newsletter as a cost-cutting measure.

The HRPDC staff is actively working to add to the mailing list, particularly with regard to civic leagues and other community-oriented organizations.

Strategies to Consider

1. Consider adding more faith-based organizations to the mailing list. A document by the FHWA entitled *Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making* notes that “Religious organizations in particular are an effective way to reach minority and ethnic groups.”
2. Identify organizations for the *under-served* - including ethnic, minority, low-income, elderly, and disabled groups and add them to the mailing list
3. Insure that social service organizations are included in the mailing list.
4. Consider adding colleges, universities, and large employers to the mailing list.
5. Consider starting an e-newsletter service.

HRPDC WEB SITE

The Hampton Roads Planning District Commission maintains a presence on the World Wide Web at www.hrpdc.org. The web site includes information on who the HRPDC and the MPO are and what they do. The site also includes news and links on topics of regional concern regarding transportation, economics, and the environment. Users may access Census data for the region or link to the web sites of all of the localities in Hampton Roads.

Effectiveness

With regard to transportation planning specifically, the HRPDC web site includes:

- Advertisements for HRPDC public meetings and special events
- Access to the current Transportation Improvement Program
- Up-to-date information on the status of the Regional Transportation Plan
- Access to the agendas and minutes of the HRPDC and MPO meetings
- Access for viewing and/or downloading of most of the transportation-related reports recently published by the HRPDC (Current count: 18)
- A general invitation for comments and/or questions from visitors to the web site
- Occasional, topic-specific surveys or requests for comments

Web site stats for the month of January 2004 are as follows:

- Site Visits = 5,531
- Average Visits/Day = 178
- Average Duration of Visit = 9 minutes, 52 seconds

In terms of measuring effectiveness, the web site is currently used primarily as a vehicle for providing information to the public and there are currently few means in place with which to gauge the public's response or action as a result of using the web site. The web site does include a link by which the public can contact HRPDC officials. In addition, on occasion there are special calls for comments on specific topics. HRPDC staff keeps track of the number of questions and comments received via the website and maintains that information in the Documentation Compendium. As mentioned previously, HRPDC staff plans to begin keeping a PIP call log that would include what the citizen is calling in reference to; i.e. an article on the web site, in the newsletter or other printed media, a report on the television or radio, etc., which may help quantify the effectiveness of the newsletter.

For comparison purposes, staff contacted six MPOs of similar population size to Hampton Roads and requested information on the number of visits to their web sites in an average month. Their responses were as follows:

- Columbus, OH Information not available
- Indianapolis, IN 7,350 visits
- Milwaukee, WI 8,000 visits
- Portland, OR 50,000 visits ¹
- Sacramento, CA 7,680 visits
- San Antonio, TX Information not available

The HRPDC staff is generally satisfied with the effectiveness of the web site since the visits per month on the web site have been stable, with a slight increase in the trend. Staff will continue to improve the effectiveness of the web site by considering some or all of the strategies listed below.

Strategies to Consider

1. Reformat the home page with an easier-to-read, more user-friendly look and feel. There is currently an overload of information on the home page.
2. Evaluate the flow of the web pages for ease of use and intuitiveness. Make adjustments as necessary.
3. Make more use of on-line surveys.
4. Continue to make more transportation studies available for download from the web site.

¹ Portland's numbers are much larger because the MPO pages are part of a web site that also includes web pages for region-wide solid waste and recycling, the Oregon Zoo, the Oregon Convention Center, expo and cultural/recreational facilities, and a jobs page.

TRANSPORTATION KIOSKS

The Transportation Kiosks are self-standing, touch-screen computer systems. The kiosks are placed in various public-accessible locations throughout the region and provide a measure of outreach into the community. The units include the option of printing coupons as an incentive for providing input. The kiosks are used to:

- Survey the public on transportation issues
- Provide the public with information on regional transportation plans
- Ask citizens to identify problem traffic locations in Hampton Roads

Effectiveness

The kiosks were originally installed at two locations on December 13, 2000. Since then, they have been placed in over 45 locations throughout the region. Kiosk installation sites have included:

- Community Centers
- Farm Fresh Grocery Stores
- Home and Garden Show
- Jamestown
- Municipal Centers
- Nauticus
- Public Libraries
- Shopping Malls
- Virginia Marine Science Museum
- Walmart Stores

The latest series of kiosk placements included 21 Farm Fresh grocery stores, between May 1, 2003 and February 3, 2004. This latest round of installations garnered 634 completed surveys, or just over 25 surveys per location or an average of 70 surveys per month.

The HRPDC staff is generally satisfied with the effectiveness of the kiosks and will continue to strive to improve the effectiveness by considering the strategies listed below.

Strategies to Consider

1. Consider upgrading the kiosks with laptop computers in the place of the desktop-type units currently installed. The use of laptop computers may provide the opportunity to power the kiosks with on-board batteries (such as

- marine batteries). This would eliminate the current problem caused by power outages or unplugging of the units. In addition, placement of the kiosks would not be tied to the location of power outlets.
2. Review the current survey to determine whether changes are warranted or desired. The current survey has been in use for three years.
 3. Consider installing the kiosks at colleges and universities. The community colleges and many Hampton Roads universities have many commuting students and faculty.
 4. Consider installing the kiosks at the sites of large employers, such as Newport News Shipbuilding.
 5. Consider installing the kiosks on military stations.
 6. Consider using the kiosks to gather names and contact information for people willing to participate in focus groups.
 7. Consider obtaining another stand-alone kiosk.

NEW ACTIVITIES

The primary goal of the Hampton Roads Public Involvement Procedure is to obtain input from a significant portion of the population of Hampton Roads. The HRPDC staff employs a variety of activities and strategies in an effort to meet this goal and continually seeks additional activities and strategies that may build upon the effectiveness of those already in place. Any new activity to be considered must be feasible in terms of cost and staff time. This section includes two activities to be considered for implementation by staff. Inclusion of an activity in this section does not mean that staff has committed to implementing the activity.

TELEPHONE SURVEY

The HRPDC staff has long been interested in obtaining statistically-valid public input. This is virtually impossible to do through the use of public meetings, calls for comments on the web site, or the transportation kiosks due to the natures of these activities.

- **Public Meetings** – Certain types of individuals are most likely to attend public meetings. Public meetings tend to draw activists with an ax to grind on particular issues. This can skew the perceived results of this type of public involvement activity. In addition, low attendance at public meetings continues to be a problem across the nation.
- **Calls for Comments on Web Site** – Only individuals comfortable with computers and use of the World Wide Web can respond. This leaves out a sizable portion of the population.
- **Transportation Kiosks** – Who responds depends on where the kiosks are placed, whether or not they are operational, and whether or not an individual is comfortable with using the touch-screen system.

Advantages

- A telephone survey can reach a random, statistically-valid sample of the population with relative ease.
- A random sample size of 600 individuals can provide results with a confidence level of 95 percent and a confidence interval of \pm four percent.
- Marketing firms that do a lot of telephone surveys are comfortable with the assumption that virtually everyone has a telephone and that potentially leaving someone out of the survey due to the lack of a telephone does not present a problem in survey validity.
- Due to the random nature of the sample selection, skewing caused by activists is neutralized.

- Having the survey conducted by an outside agency often lends credibility to the survey.
- Best for public opinion polling.

Disadvantages

- Having a survey developed and conducted by an outside agency can be relatively expensive.
- Cannot be used for issues that require that the respondent have an opportunity to review certain materials in order to answer survey questions or provide comments.

MAIL SURVEY

Mail surveys can be used to gauge public opinion on transportation issues.

Advantages

- It is possible to obtain statistically-valid results, but not as effectively as a telephone survey.
- Less expensive than telephone survey.
- It is possible to include materials with the survey, such as maps and cost figures.

Disadvantages

- Studies have found that people are less likely to take the time to fill out and mail back a survey than they are to participate in a telephone survey.
- Taking into account the response rate for mail surveys, in order to get a statistically-valid sample a very large number of surveys must be mailed out.
- Since it is dependent on individuals completing and mailing the survey forms, the time period for conducting a mail survey is not as certain as that for the telephone survey.

FOCUS GROUPS OR TARGET PARTICIPANTS

There are often issues, such as the Regional Transportation Plan, that require that the public review certain materials in order to provide comments. These issues cannot be handled with telephone surveys and have been traditionally handled through the use of public meetings. However, as stated earlier in this document, attendance at HRPDC public meetings has been less than satisfactory.

The literature search found that low attendance at transportation-related public meetings is a common problem. Public agencies across the U.S. have tried a number of things to increase public input, including the use of Citizen Advisory Committees

(CAC) and focus groups. HRPDC staff does not view the use of CACs as a significant improvement to public involvement, since the committees are usually made up of a small group of appointed individuals who are often associated with the CAC for several years. However, the use of focus groups or target participants may be considered for certain applications.

Advantages

- Can provide statistically-valid results if the group is large enough (600 people) and selected through random sampling.
- Materials can be sent to the group for review and comment.
- A database of citizens that are willing to be involved could be developed.
- The focus group may be selected to insure representation from targeted areas.
- Each focus group would be made up of different individuals. No “career” focus group members would be allowed.
- Due to the random nature of the sample selection, skewing caused by activists would be lessened.

Disadvantages

- Not as inclusive as a telephone survey because only certain types of people would be willing to participate in the focus group.
- The group size necessary for statistically-valid results is quite large.

MAKING BETTER USE OF THE MEDIA

HRPDC staff has observed a greater citizen response rate to transportation issues discussed in newspaper articles or on TV or radio programs compared to the response rate to general calls for comments in public notices or on the HRPDC web site.

Strategies to Consider

- Hold information-sharing meetings for the media, similar to a press conference, to disseminate information. This can help maximize staff resources by providing information to all the media at one time. Keeping the media involved can be a low-cost and very effective way to publicize projects and transportation issues.
- Make use of the regularly occurring transportation columns in the local newspapers. The public is more likely to read these articles than public notices.
- “It’s not just about transportation.” It can be helpful to make issues more personal by including safety, air quality, and livable communities aspects.
- Make use of local TV public access channels.

CONCLUSIONS

Four Hampton Roads Public Involvement Procedure (PIP) activities were evaluated in this report:

- Public Meetings and Listening Sessions
- HRPDC Newsletter
- HRPDC Web Site
- Transportation Kiosks

The primary findings and recommendations regarding each of the activities evaluated follow.

Public Meetings and Listening Sessions

It has been observed that it is more difficult to capture the interest of the public to discuss a 20-year regional plan than to discuss a single project that may affect a few neighborhoods in the near future. HRPDC staff has struggled with finding ways to attract more citizens to public meetings on regional plans. The PIP activities of VDOT and the localities are often better attended due to the imminent nature of the projects being discussed. The HRPDC PIP attempts to include the public involvement work of VDOT and the localities by incorporating meeting information into the HRPDC Documentation Compendium as available.

Citizen attendance at HRPDC public meetings over the last ten years has typically ranged from 0 to 10 individuals per meeting. Even the higher than average attendance recorded in 1997 (151 citizens), 2002 (147 citizens), and 2003 (60 citizens) is not enough to provide a reliable representation of the opinions of the 1.6 million people living in Hampton Roads. In addition, public meetings tend to attract people with strong opinions on specific issues, and low attendance figures exacerbate the skewing in perceived public opinion resulting from the input of such activists. For these reasons, it would be imprudent for regional planners to alter plans developed through months of work with state and local officials based solely on the comments of what may be a vocal minority.

HRPDC staff will continue to strive to increase the effectiveness of the public meetings, however, due to the inherent weaknesses of such meetings to provide substantial public involvement, much of the staff's focus will be on researching, developing, and testing other PIP activities that may turn out to be much more effective.

Newsletter

The mailing list for the **Hampton Roads Review** currently includes 2,546 addressees. The mailing list includes:

- 724 Civic Leagues, Homeowners Associations, etc.
- 1,017 Private Addresses, including businesses, churches, and individuals
- 805 Addressees including:
 - o Chambers of Commerce
 - o Local Public Officials
 - o State and Federal Transportation Officials
 - o Local Media Outlets

There is an on-going effort by HRPDC staff to add to the recipients of the newsletter, particularly with regard to civic leagues and other community-oriented organizations. Staff may also consider adding more faith-based, minority, and ethnic organizations and organizations for typically underserved groups to the mailing list.

Web Site

In the month of January 2004, the HRPDC web site was visited 5,531 times and the average duration of a visit was just under ten minutes. Staff has noted that the number of web site hits has remained stable, with a slight upward trend.

Staff is considering redesigning the web site home page to improve user friendliness and make it easier to read. More transportation reports will be made available for download and staff may increase the use of issue-specific on-line surveys.

Transportation Kiosks

Since December 13, 2000, the kiosks have been placed in more than 45 locations throughout Hampton Roads. Placement sites have included:

- Community Centers
- Farm Fresh Grocery Stores
- Home and Garden Show
- Jamestown
- Municipal Centers
- Nauticus
- Public Libraries
- Shopping Malls
- Virginia Marine Science Museum
- Walmart Stores

The latest series of kiosk installations garnered 332 completed surveys over a six-month period, or an average of 55 surveys per month. Kiosk downtime, due to power disconnections or hardware problems, resulted in fewer completed surveys than may have otherwise occurred during the same time period.

Staff may consider upgrading the computers in the kiosks with units that would run on battery power and not depend on being plugged into the location's power system. The current survey will be reviewed to determine whether changes should be made. In addition, staff continues to seek good sites for future placements of the kiosks.

NEW ACTIVITIES

The report also includes information on four new activities that staff may consider implementing: Telephone Surveys, Mail Surveys, Focus Groups, and Making Better Use of the Media. The surveys and focus group activities could provide staff with the first statistically-valid public input in the history of the HRPDC Public Involvement Procedure. The HRPDC has approved pursuing the use of a random sample telephone survey. Barring any cost problems, the first telephone survey will be conducted during FY-2005. The activity on making better use of the media would concentrate on effectively informing the public about regional planning issues and inviting the public to provide comments on transportation issues to the HRPDC.