CHAPTER 7: Strategies

Beyond meeting state and federal requirements, the PPP outlines strategies employed by the Hillsborough County MPO to further encourage public participation and be responsive to the unique needs of the community. Given that the specific needs of the community are prone to changing rapidly, the MPO exercises discretion in implementing the strategies outlined below on an as-needed basis.

Telling Our Story

Telling our story in a language and manner that is both understandable and meaningful to the public is a necessary strategy, given the diversity of the community being served. Framing our story from the perspective of the audience makes MPO plans and programs more relevant to *people* and greatly encourages their participation. For example, 'traffic' is a relatable concept for many people, whereas 'congestion management process' may not be readily understood by the general public. Explaining technical and complex transportation concepts in understandable and relatable terms has been, and continues to be, a point of emphasis for the Hillsborough County MPO.

Being Cooperative and Creative

Using pictures and other visual aids to tell our story is an excellent way to make planning more relatable. Creative marketing approaches for advertisements and collateral pieces helps us to effectively communicate messages to those affected by planning projects. Advanced techniques, such as still-photography or animated simulations, make it easy for citizens to visualize future transportation projects and imagine how they may be affected.

Involving the Community

Public participation is a mission, not simply a requirement. The MPO supports the following public participation goals in order to encourage community involvement:

Visibility

Raise the awareness of the MPO as a leader in transportation planning for Tampa, Temple Terrace, Plant City and Hillsborough County.

Engagement

Involve the public in every phase of the transportation planning process.

Notification

Notify the public when key decisions are being made and provide opportunities for comment.

Responsiveness

Ensure that issues raised by the public are explicitly considered and that a timely and appropriate response is provided.

Communication

Ensure that all communication media and MPO plans are presented in a format understood by partner agencies and the public.

Resourcefulness

Be creative - optimize and effectively use resources dedicated to public participation.

User-Friendliness

Provide user-friendly collateral materials, and communicate in a clear, credible, concise and consistent manner. Where appropriate, use visualization techniques to describe plans consistent with a citizen's perspective.

Ease

Make it easy for all citizens to get involved and be heard.

Access

Proactively reach out to inform and engage populations that have been under-represented in transportation decision-making.

Compliance

Meet or exceed the spirit, intent and requirements of local, state and federal statutes and regulations.

Capturing All Input

Public commentary comes from myriad sources, including e-mail correspondence, both scientific and informal polls, remarks offered at community meetings, or statements entered into the record at advertised public hearings.

MPO planners, therefore, must ensure that all such comments are captured and that no input is ignored. Staff and consultants will make concerted efforts to document and synthesize all comments, regardless of source, so that the MPO board can give full consideration to all issues raised by the public, and respond appropriately.

MPO staff and consultants employ tools and standard procedures to retain and manage public commentary, including:

- Minutes and summaries of all regular MPO and committee meetings to keep track of public speakers and record comments;

- Annual logs to document all MPO public outreach events and meetings, documenting the date, location, number of participants, any issues raised, and whether the event was held in an Environmental Justice area;

- Annual logs of MPO publications and brochures, showing the number of copies produced and their distribution;

- All e-mails sent to mpo@plancom.org are forwarded to the appropriate staff for a response, and are copied to a digital folder to facilitate their compilation and synthesis;

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- Public comment compilers are used to log and transcribe comments and attachments, such as scanned letters; track major topics addressed by the commenter, such as mode of transportation, and whether the commenter favors or doesn't favor investing in that mode; and produce standard reports;

- Social media and networking sources are increasingly popular forms of communication. Input received through such sources may be compiled through the use of archiving software to facilitate records retention and searches for particular people, topics or conversational threads across different platforms. The MPO has a policy governing the appropriate use of such social networking/media, included as Appendix H; and

- Virtually every plan or study initiated by the MPO has a public engagement component. The specific techniques will vary, but MPO staff and/or consultants are tasked with compiling public comments and documenting how collected input affected the outcome of the particular plan or study. All major plans, studies and reports should feature a section entitled "What We Heard" from the public and how that affected the outcome. Appendix F provides sample language for scopes of work to capture public input, as well as to document an explicit MPO response.

Members of the public are consulted in the development of the Public Participation Plan. The draft of the document is posted on PlanHillsborough.org for 45 days, and linked on the agency's social media and Current Projects & Drafts website sidebar. A review copy is placed in the library, and the document is revised per comments from MPO committees. Beginning in 2018, the agency is also providing review copies to non-transportation planning professionals for review. This is to ensure that the document is accessible to a range of individuals interested in the public participation component of transportation planning.

Written comments and correspondence are treated as public records and are subject to disclosure under Florida's Sunshine Laws. They are archived and kept for a number of years per Florida's public records retention requirements.

Collaborating with Partners

Public outreach can often be a time-intensive, costly endeavor. The MPO, therefore, strives to reduce redundancies and ensure cost-effectiveness by collaborating with other entities to expand its outreach efforts and effectively engage the public. For example, MPO workshops are frequently joint efforts held in collaboration with other public agencies and non-governmental organizations. Economies can be achieved through joint promotion and cost-sharing agreements to facilitate the process of hosting workshops, meetings and public events. Some strategies utilized to improve cooperation and coordination with our agency partners are included below:

- Collaborating more closely with agency partners on documents, such as the LRTP, TIP, and FDOT District 7 Work Program;

- Ensuring consistency between FDOT District 7 design plans and MPO-adopted or proposed LRTPs, TIPs, etc.;

- Requesting complete information from FDOT on projects included in the TIP;

- Designing educational materials with input from the public regarding the best methods for explaining project development processes in plain English; and

- Updating collateral public message materials as they become available.

Making Use of Technology

Internet access and the use of social networks to communicate are increasingly prevalent. The MPO has taken advantage of technology to inform the public about our plans and programs. New forms of communication technology allow the MPO and the public to engage in a two-way dialogue. "Crowdsourcing" or Web 2.0 technology will enable the MPO to fashion plans in an even more collaborative, rather than reactive, manner. Crowdsourcing platforms allow for communal problem-solving in real time, where users may interact both with the MPO and with each other. Other internet-based tools, such as wikis, webcasts, photo inventories and online dialogues, also allow users to develop documents collaboratively. These can be used, for example, to draft corridor plans with direct input from community representatives.

Mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets, are also increasingly prevalent hardware. Such technology will enable the MPO to continue delivering its messages directly to interested parties and obtain immediate feedback. These forms of communication, however, are not

without their nuances. One unique caveat to using these new forms of communication is that all messages sent or received are considered public records, and are thus subject to Sunshine Law requirements governing retention and disclosure. Moreover, board and committee members are cautioned against using these new media to communicate among themselves on topics likely to be discuss in public meetings. (See Appendix D for excerpts from Florida Attorney General's Advisory Opinion AGO 2009-19).

In response to a recommendation made by the Department of Transportation in the MPO's 2017 Federal Certification Review, the MPO has launched an online guide of common transportation acronyms. The Transportation Acronym Guide (TAG) is available online at http://www.planhillsborough.org/mpo_glossary/. This guide is also available in document form and attached to this document as Appendix A. To promote this product, the MPO posted it under its Current Projects & Drafts list on PlanHillsborough.org and made an announcement on social media.

Involving Diverse Constituencies

The public comprises a wide array of people with different interests, backgrounds, and mobility options. The Hillsborough MPO recognizes that not everyone has the time, ability, or motivation to directly participate in transportation planning. In what follows, some constituencies are identified which may pose, or endure, significant challenges to participating in public outreach efforts. Each is listed and specific strategies are discussed which may address those challenges.

- **Private sector transportation providers and freight stakeholders** have limited time when it comes to transportation planning. They seek immediate relief to problems that directly affect their drivers and impose costs on their operations. Slow-downs caused by bottlenecks, turn-movement restrictions, or other problems amenable to relatively short-term, low-cost solutions are "low-hanging fruit" that can attract the interest of freight stakeholders. Umbrella groups, such as the Florida Trucking Association, and proxies, such as Port Tampa Bay, can sometimes represent these interests. Inviting freight stakeholders and private transportation providers to annual summits and/or regional meetings to enlist their help in identifying freight and goods movement problems and solutions may be preferred in lieu of monthly meetings. Telephone interviews are another way to obtain their input on specific issues or plans.

- **Persons with mobility impairments** often have difficulty traveling to meeting locations. Specialized transportation such as wheelchair lift-equipped vans, provided by the Sunshine Line, may have to be scheduled to pick them up and return them home. Another option is to attend events where there are likely to be a large number of disabled persons in attendance, and/or organized by groups that speak for the disabled.

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- **Children and students** make up a significant portion of the non-driving public. Consequently, they are major users of bicycle and pedestrian networks. Getting involved with Boys and Girls Clubs, scouts, school and PTA activities such as "teach-in" events is one way to get input from them and their parents or teachers.
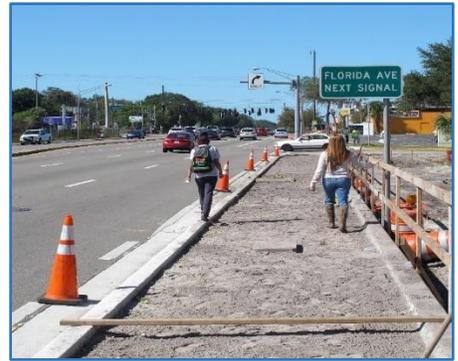
- **Low income individuals and minorities** often have limited involvement in transportation planning. They may not have access to a vehicle, not be aware, or not have time to go to a meeting about transportation. Outreach can be extended to these groups through gatekeepers, including churches, neighborhood groups or community fairs, and has proven to be effective in obtaining input from these constituents.

- The MPO maintains a growing inventory of **community groups which represent or work with protected or vulnerable populations**. The inventory indicates whether the group or organization represents the perspective of one or more of the six demographic criteria used to identify Communities of Concern. The MPO will use the inventory for the 2045 Long Range Transportation Plan, among other plans and projects, to ensure adequate involvement of these communities in the planning process. The inventory is updated regularly and is included in this document as Appendix J.