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National Center for Applied Transit Technology

Virtual Engagement Guidebook

Available free of charge at N-CATT's website: www.n-catt.org

Overview

N-CATT's Virtual Public Engagement Guidebook is a reference tool for transit agencies, mobility managers, human service transportation providers, tribal transportation programs, and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) that seek to expand or diversify their practices for collaborating and engaging with their teams, policymakers, stakeholders, partners, and members of the public. The Guidebook was developed by Kearns & West for N-CATT.

At the heart of the Guidebook's offerings are equity considerations. Equitable virtual engagement is essential for an inclusive community planning process. The Guidebook highlights meaningful and creative ways to engage non-English speakers, people with disabilities, low-income populations, communities that lack access to the internet or technology, minority populations, and other underserved groups. These practices offer planners and facilitators opportunities to bridge the digital divide and incorporate the voices of traditionally underrepresented communities into the conversation.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift from in-person to virtual engagement. As communities emerge from the pandemic, the Guidebook reflects on lessons learned by adaptable agencies, as well as ongoing opportunities to:



Reconsider how to engage the communities you serve.



Increase the size and diversity of your audiences, especially when combined with offline approaches.



Make engagement more accessible to some communities.



Collaborate more easily with other organizations.



What is public engagement?

The Guidebook defines engagement in terms of interaction: where information is shared by the organization and where the organization receives feedback, input, or comments.

The Guidebook focuses on three motivators for public engagement:



Inform – Deliver timely and credible information to transit riders, target stakeholders, and the general public.



Engage – Solicit community input and feedback on transit plans and proposals.



Persuade – Secure buy-in and community understanding of transit projects or agency priorities.



Virtual Engagement Tools & Approaches

The Guidebook provides analysis, examples, and case studies for implementing virtual engagement tools and approaches. Specifically, it reviews different meeting designs, occasions for which these meeting designs might be applied to transit agency or transportation organization events, practices for more effective virtual meetings, and other virtual engagement tools that can be used in combination with meetings or as standalone programs.

Meetings and Events

Agencies have a variety of tools available to them to conduct meetings and lead public events. Meetings are one of the most important tools in the public engagement toolbox because they allow for direct interaction between staff, planners, consultants, and members of the public. Some meetings are recurring with regular participants providing ongoing feedback and input, while other events may address special initiatives or plans, such as the adoption of a new fare structure, a service plan update, facility design, etc.

The Guidebook reviews examples of virtual meetings and events, offering an overview of their motivators, audience size, and complexity. Meetings and events highlighted within the Guidebook include stakeholder group meetings, public meetings/public hearings, Q&A meetings and press conference, webcasts/telecast/radio broadcasts, and hybrid meetings and events.



Other Forms of Engagement

If public meetings are not the most suitable approach to public engagement for a project, there are several other strategies that can be considered, including using social media, websites, and surveys.

The Guidebook details different public engagement approaches for other forms of virtual engagement, offering considerations for cost, time range, staff commitment, and accessibility. The types of engagement reviewed include include digital fact sheets, digital newsletters, podcasts, videos, and project websites.



Tools & Applications

Many platforms and tools can support transportation organizations as they expand their virtual engagement efforts among key stakeholders and groups. The Guidebook outlines virtual engagement tools and offers examples of commonly used platforms for managing webinars & virtual meetings, livestreaming and video, website development, digital collaboration tools, community outreach and planning, and mapping.



Templates

The Guidebook also includes a resource guide that includes templates with tips for developing public-facing agendas and internal meeting support plans.

Lessons from the Guidebook: Ways to Make Virtual Engagement Successful

- Confirm your engagement objectives before designing the engagement effort.
- Understand the tradeoffs of different virtual meeting types – and when a synchronous meeting may not be necessary.
- Test technology tools to find the right ones for your organization.
- Acknowledge that inequities exist and work to improve accessibility.
- Accept that virtual engagement is not always a perfect substitute for in-person.
- Consider hybrid engagement and low-tech options.
- Prepare and practice...and practice.