MDOT
Michigan Department of Transportation

VIRTUAL PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT
BENEFITS AND **BARRIERS**

A Practical Guide to VPI Tools

Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) and
FHWA EDC 5-Virtual Public Involvement Best Practices

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![MDOT - Michigan Department of Transportation]

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Information today is often disseminated rapidly, and received and shared quickly via multiple channels. The most effective public involvement strategies are developed in response to the answers to the five questions listed to the right. →

Conducting meaningful stakeholder and public outreach can be challenging even when using only traditional, in-person techniques. Adding modern technology and digital tools to a public involvement strategy can feel even more complicated. With seemingly countless options of tools available, the virtual public involvement (VPI) learning curve can feel steep and intimidating.

This guide provides an overview of VPI tools to encourage meaningful public participation during a transportation infrastructure or regional planning project. It describes the basics of implementing VPI tools, the benefits and barriers to consider when using them, and how they can make your efforts more inclusive.

To encourage meaningful engagement, a public involvement plan should clearly define the purpose of the engagement goals, which should drive the choice of VPI tools. Likely,

the most comprehensive strategy will utilize a combination of VPI *and* traditional, in-person engagement methods – a hybrid approach that, when implemented correctly, ensures diverse and inclusive public participation.

This guide is an interim supplement to *MDOT's Public Involvement/Public Hearing Procedures for Federal-aid Project Development*, which satisfies the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) public involvement requirements under 23 U.S.C. 128 and 139, 23 CFR 771.111(h), and National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) procedures. The information in this document can be used by statewide transportation organizations and Municipal Planning Organizations (MPOs) to implement VPI strategies into their planning products.

This guide was shaped from interviews with MDOT Champions and MPOs associated with the pilot VPI projects, and national research of best practices. It will be updated as technology and VPI tools evolve.

Before choosing a VPI strategy, consider the following questions:

» **Who** are you trying to connect with?

» **What** are the communication and outreach goals?

» **When** is the best time to reach out? Are you asking for direct input on a pending decision, or is your goal only to share information?

» **Where** is the project located? Who is directly and indirectly impacted? Are there unique or special communication needs among residents, commuters or stakeholders in the study area?

» **Why** should people be interested in the proposed action?

INTRODUCTION TO
VIRTUAL PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

■ **Public involvement is integral to transportation, infrastructure and regional planning processes. Technology now allows transportation agencies to meet people where they are: online.**

Today, people expect information quickly – and get it from a wide variety of sources. Traditional, in-person public involvement techniques can no longer be the only approach to obtaining meaningful and well-rounded public feedback.

Integrating VPI tools with traditional methods creates a robust, inclusive and comprehensive public involvement strategy that increases participation and enables transportation agencies to make decisions in consideration of and to benefit the public's needs and preferences.

Best practices show that adding VPI tools to your plan increases:

» Diversity among respondents
» Participation
» Inclusion
» Convenience
» Transparency
» Access

What is VPI?

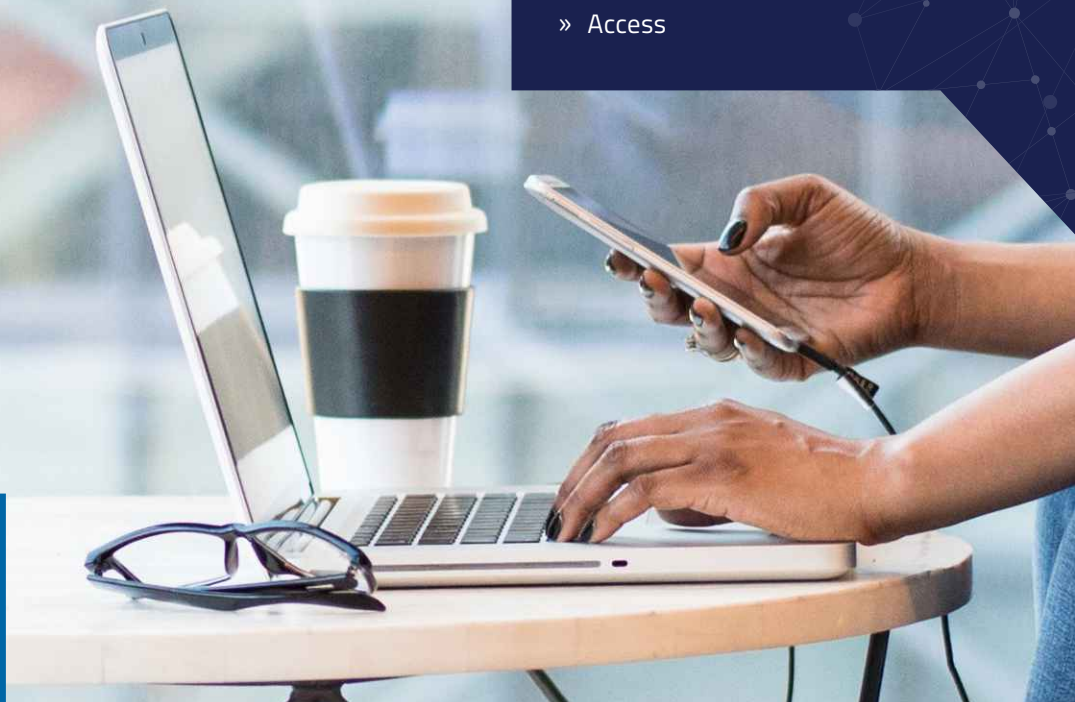Virtual Public Involvement or VPI is the use of digital technology to engage individuals or to visualize projects and plans.

Barriers to using only traditional public involvement methods:

» Lack of diverse viewpoints
» Language and cultural barriers
» Work, family and social schedules
» Modern expectations of today's population

86% OF MICHIGAN HOUSEHOLDS HAVE A **BROADBAND INTERNET**[1] CONNECTION

89% OF **MOBILE** INTERNET USERS GO ONLINE DAILY, AND **54%** OF AMERICANS **GO ONLINE DAILY** USING OTHER DEVICES[2]

1 Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey One-year Estimate. 2 Source: Pew Research Center.

VPI Tools for Transportation and Planning Agencies

The transportation decision-making process purposely allows for meaningful consideration and input from a variety of interested individuals. Effectively utilizing VPI tools allows an agency to increase the reach of information to transportation system users and offers multiple, convenient ways for them to provide meaningful input.

Timely and strong engagement methods can accelerate project delivery by helping identify and address public concerns early in the project, and it can improve the overall customer experience of interacting with an agency. VPI tools allow daily system users to share input in ways that are most convenient to each participating individual.

Some situations may need only one-way communication – just receiving feedback or information from the public; however, two-way communication should always be a goal and a priority. Choose VPI tools that help establish a dialogue or exchange of information, so that the public and stakeholders know they are being heard.

To Increase Reach and Awareness

- » Social media
- » Press releases, media contacts
- » Online and social media advertising
- » Project website or webpage
- » Partnering strategies
- » Local online forums and blogs
- » E-newsletters, email and text message blasts, targeted email lists

### To Share Information and Gather Feedback

- » Online surveys and polls
- » Online meetings
- » Virtual office hours
- » Livestreamed meetings
- » Interactive and GIS mapping
- » Online comment forms
- » PowerPoint/PDF presentation with optional closed-caption narration
- » Transcripts
- » Videos
- » Animations/simulations
- » Virtual rooms
- » Create-your-own-design technologies
- » Online comment forms
- » Crowdsourcing
- » Mobile apps
- » QR codes

⊘ VPI TIPS & TRICKS

COLLECTING AND TRACKING COMMENTS

- Collect comments from the public at any time during the decision-making process. Comments may arrive from multiple sources including emails, web forms, texts, phone calls, letters, or public hearing transcripts. All comments received through virtual and traditional mediums are part of the public record.

- Comments made on social media, while often an informal "barometer" of community conversations, typically are not accepted as part of the official project record. To avoid conflicts or confusion, establish a protocol for handling comments posted on social media before your project's initial public engagement phase begins. Prepare a post that clearly informs people where and how to submit comments for the record.

- Comments from multiple sources can get disorganized quickly. Set up a tracking and categorization process before outreach begins. Use a single tool or spreadsheet that can organize all comments regardless of how they are submitted, and use this tool to also track responses to comments.

- Many VPI tools and applications such as online surveys automatically capture and organize feedback into spreadsheets, graphs and other helpful analytics.

- At a minimum, each comment should be documented with:
  - » Date
  - » Contact information
  - » Commenter's statements
  - » Tracking number (optional)

- Additional attributes to consider include:
  - » Hot topics or keywords
  - » Comment location
  - » Stakeholder sentiment

Steps for Handling All Public Comments

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Collect	Document	Analyze	Acknowledge	Distribute	Incorporate	Respond
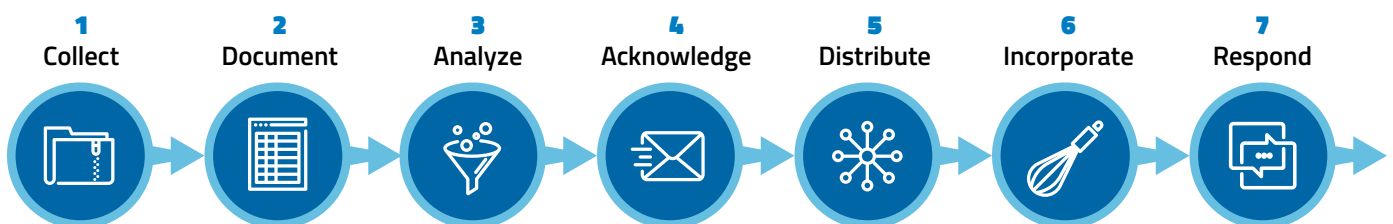
Considerations for Online Event Planning

Online meeting platform Zoom offers both a "meeting" and a "webinar" option. The meeting option functionality allows attendees to unmute themselves; the webinar option allows only the host to unmute participants. The latter option gives the presenter better control over the event and keep the process moving along; however, the meeting option provides great two-way communication opportunities.

Always begin with an agenda, so attendees know what to expect, and include a dedicated commenting or question-and-answer period after your presentation.

During this portion of your event, begin with the attendees who want to comment live. Call on them one at a time, unmuting them to speak, and re-muting them after they finish and before you respond. Monitor this process closely to allow for as many participants as possible to comment live and enough time to respond.

Not enough time to respond to all questions and comments? Reference the ones submitted online to create a frequently asked questions (FAQ) piece to post on the project website.

USE **MULTIPLE** VPI TOOLS TO MOST EFFECTIVELY SHARE YOUR PROJECT'S **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT** OPPORTUNITIES

✓ VPI TIPS & TRICKS

GETTING THE WORD OUT

To spread the word about your project and public involvement opportunities, use multiple VPI methods such as websites, social media posts, and email or text message blasts.

Established social media channels and accounts are a natural choice; however, for even broader reach, lean on local third-party municipal and community groups to share information on their websites and social media accounts. Collect contact information to follow up on comments you receive through third-party outreach.

Your VPI toolbox should include wide-ranging digital ads and announcements to reach all potentially impacted parties, not just those living adjacent to the project limits.

Use VPI to reach people whom the project may impact indirectly such as commuters, seasonal residents, and those who may be impacted by changes in public transit.

Also, be sure to contact statewide disability advocacy organizations (see Page 12 for contact information).

MAINTAINING CIVILITY IN A VIRTUAL ATMOSPHERE

VPI tools can provide a sense of anonymity, which could empower some participants to act inappropriately. From social media comments to survey responses to virtual events, when they are not face-to-face with peers or the project team, some participants might "cross the line" of acceptable interaction.

On social media:
Hide comments that include vulgarity or name-calling. Leave in place comments that are negative toward the project and respond with instructions for submitting a formal comment.

During virtual events:
The facilitator should closely monitor comments during the question-and-answer portion or chat, and use an application that allows the facilitator to unmute participants.

Considerations for Utilizing Social Media Channels

Social media posts are a great way to get the word out about public involvement opportunities such as events or surveys, or to share project information and updates. However, social media apps use algorithms to customize users' information feeds, and users themselves can also prioritize the content they receive from other accounts — even if they "follow" those accounts. This can present challenges for engagement efforts that rely solely on social media to share information with the public: Your post may not appear in all your followers' content and news feeds.

Paid social media advertisements allow you to target a specific audience to meet set demographic criteria. These ads — although an additional cost — can boost participation among your desired audience and engage certain populations who could otherwise be left out.

LESSONS LEARNED AND **BEST PRACTICES**

In 2020, MDOT and FHWA Michigan Division selected multiple transportation projects throughout the state to pilot various aspects of using and deploying VPI tools.

MDOT now uses VPI tools on public engagement efforts for projects as innovative ways to engage with stakeholders. The practice is part of the state's Every Day Counts 5 (or EDC-5) initiative. Interviews and project reviews uncovered meaningful lessons learned and best practices related to VPI tools and techniques.

Most Common Feedback from Pilot Projects

Project Champion and MPO Feedback	Recommended Best Practice
Technical difficulties due to poor internet quality by host of a livestream virtual meeting led to no audio on a live event and the event was canceled. Ended up recording and posting presentation online.	Always have IT support or a contractor with IT support available to troubleshoot in real time. Open the meeting 30 minutes early to test the connection and audio-visual capabilities.
There is a lot of upfront prep work that goes into virtual meetings. It can quickly get scattered and uncoordinated.	Have a dedicated meeting facilitator to keep the team on track, make sure everything is running properly, and be the point person if anything goes wrong.
Virtual office hours are a great way to connect with people with busy schedules who just want to pop in to learn more. Helped a lot during the global pandemic.	Schedule office hours for a specified time of 10-15 minutes to provide enough time that you would give at an in-person meeting.
Adoption of VPI tools was sped up by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most people they come across know how to use the technologies, however, there are some people that needed assistance.	Include clear instructions on how to use the VPI tool on the project website or within the tool itself. Always start virtual meetings with an overview and provide instructions with survey tools.

The Michigan VPI Pilot Projects

MDOT and FHWA Michigan Division identified the following projects for VPI pilot testing:

» MDOT:
I-94 Ann Arbor/Saline to US-23 Feasibility Study
City of Ann Arbor
Washtenaw County

» MDOT:
M-28 Reconstruction
City of Munising
Alger County

» MDOT:
US-12 Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) Study from Campus Martius to I-96
City of Detroit
Wayne County

» MDOT:
US-131/ I-96 PEL Study
City of Grand Rapids
Kent County

» MDOT:
State Long-Range Transportation Plan

» City of Ann Arbor:
Nixon Road Corridor Design Project

» City of Ann Arbor:
Ann Arbor Quiet Zone Study

PROJECT **SPOTLIGHT:**
MDOT's State Long-Range Transportation Plan

*Through the use of VPI tools, the state long-range plan reached the public in **every county in the state**.*

Survey
The survey was on MetroQuest's website from Jan. 1-April 15, 2019

10,108
VISITORS TO THE METROQUEST SITE

6,300
SURVEYS SUBMITTED VIA METROQUEST

Telephone Town Halls
People joined the telephone town halls for an average of 5.91 minutes

3,048
PEOPLE WHO JOINED CALLS FOR A PERIOD

621
MAX PARTICIPANTS OF CALLS AT ANY TIME

VPI IN PRACTICE: CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOOLS

Wondering Where to Begin Utilizing VPI for Engagement?

First, consider your ...

GOALS

+

AUDIENCE

+

BUDGET

+

SCHEDULE

Then, tell your story!

VPI Tool Categories

» Comprehensive VPI Platforms
» Virtual Reality Spaces
» Static Online Meetings
» Live Virtual Meetings
» Telephone Town Halls
» Online Surveys

» Project Web Presence
» Fillable Comment Forms
» Narrated Presentations
» Social Media
» Public Access Cable TV/Radio
» Drive-In Meetings

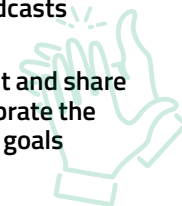## EXAMPLE 01
PLANNING STUDY

⊙ ABOUT THE PROJECT
Located in an urban core community in Michigan with many diverse stakeholders

⊙ PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT GOAL
Create an open and safe environment to facilitate two-way conversations on a wide range of improvement alternatives

Consider using these VPI tools to **listen** and **identify initial community concerns**:

- Conduct online surveys
- Launch study website
- Identify stakeholders
- Identify early populations with internet access
- Hold virtual meetings
- Leverage social media to push facts and updates
- Hold a hybrid meeting (virtual *and* in-person, simultaneously) and post a narrated presentation on YouTube and the study website, sharing link with stakeholders
- Host a virtual reality space to share study findings
- Publish study findings via multiple channels including study website, social media, YouTube, and local public TV and radio broadcasts
- Thank participants for involvement and share next steps. Also, take time to celebrate the community's help in meeting your goals

EXAMPLE **02**
DESIGN PROJECT

⊙ ABOUT THE PROJECT

Located in a rural area of Michigan with limited internet connection capabilities

⊙ PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT GOAL

Maintain stakeholders' trust built through extensive outreach during the planning stage as final design decisions are made

Consider using these following VPI tools to **share design alternatives** and **collect public feedback**:

- ○ Communicate design goals clearly on website

- ○ Hold telephone town halls and post at places with internet access flyers with links to recorded or narrated presentations

- ○ Seek input on major milestones using public access TV and radio

- ○ Leverage social media to identify key stakeholders with whom you should meet in person

- ○ Create stakeholders lists and use email blasts or digital newsletters to inform stakeholders about opportunities to comment

- ○ Keep your project website updated throughout the design to avoid last-minute changes

- ○ Use public access TV and radio to announce next project steps

- ○ Thank participants for their participation and share next steps. Take time to celebrate the community's input

EXAMPLE **03**
CONSTRUCTION PROJECT

⊙ ABOUT THE PROJECT

Located in a town in Michigan where the project will be constructed over two years

⊙ PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT GOAL

Balance safety during construction activities with access needs of local businesses and community, while maintaining open communication with public

Consider using these VPI tools to **share updates** and **foster public dialogue** during construction:

- ○ Assess the best ways to communicate with the community using online surveys

- ○ Hold live virtual meetings at which people can share and listen to others' concerns, and to communicate lessons learned

- ○ Use social media to push timely and regular construction updates (daily, weekly, emergency), and to maintain contact with key stakeholders throughout project – especially during the construction off-season. Consider targeted social media ads or partner with surrounding municipal agencies to reach commuters

- ○ Develop virtual presentations and dashboards to highlight construction progress

- ○ Circulate fillable comment forms during the off season after the first year's construction to gather feedback about what to improve during year two

- ○ Use public access TV and radio to announce traffic-related milestones, share progress and promote other VPI opportunities

- ○ Don't forget to publish, tag and tell others your success stories using VPI

VIRTUAL MEETINGS **101**

■ Traditionally, public involvement hearings and meetings are in-person events; however, adding a virtual, broadcast or dial-in meeting gives the public more opportunities to engage with your project, encouraging more participation and generating more diverse feedback.

Virtual Meeting Process

01 PLAN

» Define the meeting type; for example, internal or external
» Develop a plan that documents all protocols and processes
» Understand your community and potential attendance barriers
  › Analyze demographics
  › Prioritize reaching environmental justice populations and accommodating Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements

02 PREPARE

» Choose a virtual platform based on compatibility with your host network
» Identify various roles such as facilitator, moderator, timekeeper, speaker, note-taker
» Create host and participant links and call-in information
» Develop talking points, FAQs, engagement methods, and a "technology housekeeping" script to be read at the start of the meeting
» Post all related materials online and announce your event

03 TEST

» Perform dry run and test all aspects of the technology
» Depending on type of meeting (hybrid meeting or separate virtual) separate set-up will occur
» Ensure that the meeting recording, closed captioning, and all other video and audio functions work correctly

04 FOLLOW UP

» Post recorded meeting online
» Post other meeting materials or project information
» Evaluate results
  › Is further follow-up with participants needed?
  › Should you update the project FAQ based on meeting comments or questions?

⊘ VPI TIPS & TRICKS

BUDGETING VPI

Estimate how many people in the project area would utilize a virtual meeting option versus in-person meeting before finalizing your public involvement budget.

• Engage other public agencies such as municipalities, regional planning organizations and economic development groups in the community who have conducted virtual meetings to gauge interest in this format.

• In areas that have no or limited experience with virtual meetings, consider publishing a survey early in your outreach to get a better idea of participation.

Livestreaming an in-person meeting can be more expensive than simply holding a separate virtual meeting, depending on software and other factors; however, a standalone virtual meeting will require more staff bandwidth and prep time.

⊘ VPI TIPS & TRICKS

↗ NAVIGATING THE LEARNING CURVE

Every virtual meeting tool will present a learning curve the first time your team uses it.

Plan time for training, prep, and a rehearsal before the meeting. Assign a "technology lead" to be your team's expert on operating your virtual meeting tool. This person should plan, set up and operate the online meeting. Additionally, each team member should also understand their respective roles before the dry run and live virtual event.

DEMOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS

- Urban areas are more likely to offer stronger broadband connections, but do not assume all potential meeting attendees have access to a broadband connection.
- Virtual meetings are desirable for people with busy work and family schedules, and commuters who might not live in the project area but access it frequently.
- Rural areas struggle with strong broadband connections and residents are more likely to need a call-in option to participate in virtual meetings.
- Participants without broadband will likely participate via phone if an in-person meeting is not available. Make sure that the virtual meeting content can be understood easily without visuals, or make visuals available to potential attendees by mailing them or making them available at a local library or public office.
- Assess the languages spoken most commonly by people in the project area, and make translated versions of your meeting materials available to download, or add a notice to all project materials that translated versions are available upon request. In much of Michigan, English and at least one other language is typical to the population, which often includes large numbers of Hispanic and Arabic people.

Virtual Meeting Options

Easiest Participation

Telephone Town Hall

Description: Call-in, audio-only meetings without a presentation. Typically used in areas in which people might not have broadband internet access

Attendee engagement: Participate via phone from anywhere. Attendees can submit comments and take polls by pressing phone keys

↑ **Pros:** Dialing in from a phone is simple and user-friendly. Broadband connection not needed

↓ **Cons:** Cannot display project info visually. Difficult to facilitate conversation among participants

Most Common

Online Meeting

Description: Web-based meeting – separate from in-person meeting – that participants join online or by phone

Attendee engagement: Participate on computer, phone or smartphone by watching broadcast (via web) or listening (dial-in/phone); attendees may submit text (online chat) or verbal (web or phone) comments

↑ **Pros:** Accessible on phone and computer; best for dialogue among staff and attendees; can display presentation or other visual content on screen

↓ **Cons:** Call-in attendees may be confused by not being able to see what is on the screen

Most Complex

Hybrid Meeting

Description: Single meeting that includes both in-person and virtual participation. Typically has three components working simultaneously: the in-person and virtual meetings, and the technology connecting them. Third-party contractor typically needed to coordinate all meeting technology

Attendee engagement: Participate in person, online or by phone by viewing (via web) or listening to (dial-in/phone) broadcast of in-person meeting. Attendees may submit comments in writing (hard-copy forms or online chat) or verbally (web or phone, depending on capabilities)

↑ **Pros:** Includes most options for participation for single meeting. Allows attendees to hear all feedback, questions and answers

↓ **Cons:** Requires a lot of planning, staff time and working with a contractor on technology issues

COLLECTING TITLE VI INFORMATION

- The polling functions within many virtual meeting platforms do not allow open-ended responses, which can be an obstacle to collecting Title VI survey information. One work-around: Add to the survey a list of zip codes in the project area that also includes the options "commuter" and "other." You can also use SurveyMonkey or a similar tool to create your survey and send a link to it via the virtual meeting chat.
- For best participation when collecting Title VI survey responses, introduce the survey at the start of the virtual meeting, leave it open during, and remind attendees again at the end of the meeting.

Real-Time Online Meeting Comment Management

During an online meeting, comments can come rapidly. Some people will be commenting and asking questions by phone or computer, and others will submit feedback via the meeting's chat function. To help manage submissions, consider the following actions:

» If you are expecting high participation, extra staff will be needed. Designate at least one moderator to manage live comments, and prepare someone from the speakers' panel to be ready to respond.

» Perform a dry run and make sure all staff are comfortable with the tool(s) being used.

» Follow up on all comments and questions you didn't get to address during the meeting. Provide participants alternate submission methods, or provide attendees an FAQ document after the event.

ALL PUBLIC COMMENTS RECEIVED DURING VIRTUAL MEETINGS ARE PART OF THE PUBLIC RECORD REGARDLESS OF TIMING OR FORMAT

Handling Public Comments and Questions

Handling Comments BEFORE MEETING	Handling Comments DURING MEETING	Handling Comments AFTER MEETING
In the meeting notification, invite questions before the public meeting	Offer multiple ways to comment and ask questions, both virtually and in person	Consider extending the public comment period beyond 10 days
Use the questions received to frame the meeting presentation or FAQ document	Designate a phone number for call-in comments/questions	
Consider preparing Q-and-A slides to discuss during the meeting	Answer questions during the Q-and-A portion of the meeting	
	At the meeting's end, remind people how they can submit comments	

⊘ VPI TIPS & TRICKS

VIRTUAL MEETING ETIQUETTE

Discuss virtual meeting etiquette with your team before each public virtual event. Recommendations include the following tips and topics:

• Choose appropriate attire and dress as if you were attending an in-person event. Avoid wearing clothes with intricate patterns such as stripes, checks or dots. Visible textures can be distracting or appear distorted on video. If wearing neutral colors, make sure your clothing and face contrast sufficiently with the backdrop.

• Check the lighting to ensure a clear image. The light source should be outside the camera frame and facing the subject. Correct the display for harshness, glare, overexposure or dark shadows. If possible, adjust the camera settings to improve brightness and contrast. If you use a ring light, check for glare on subjects' glasses or windows.

• Adjust the camera to be at eye level and focus your eyes toward the camera. If using more than one monitor, position them close together, so your eye movements will be less obvious to the audience.

• Scan the room and the area viewable by the camera to ensure there is nothing that is inappropriate or disorderly. A clean, simple backdrop is preferred.

• Speaking from talking points rather than a script helps the narrative flow more naturally.

• Speakers at virtual meetings communicate most effectively when they are on camera, which also benefits people with total and partial hearing loss. This lets participants read speakers' lips and see their facial expressions and other nonverbal communications and cues. Learn more from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

• Take steps to prevent interruptions and disturbances such as a barking dog. If an interruption is unavoidable, mute your audio when you are not on camera.

• Manage situations in which a participant begins "grandstanding" and the meeting begins to get off track. Unmute participants so they can share their comments or questions, and mute them again before you respond and move on.

Prepare for Issues

No matter the type of virtual meeting selected, just as things can happen with in-person meetings, there are issues you can prepare for.

TECHNICAL ISSUES: Assign staff to enable access to the virtual meeting control panel if the main organizer/host loses their connection.

POWER OUTAGE AND/OR SEVERE WEATHER: Position virtual meeting staff with facilitator/host/moderator role(s) in different geographic locations. Write down the dial-in number, and use it to call into the virtual meeting.

SLOW INTERNET CONNECTION: Facilitator/host/moderator should select a broadcast location with broadband and phone dial-in capabilities, if necessary. Staff should be prepared to help attendees troubleshoot via chat or phone. Always have a dial-in option for attendees.

TECHNOLOGY CRASH: If the virtual meeting component cannot proceed or occur for an undetermined reason, reschedule the entire meeting. Consider having a backup date and send an email notification to registrants as soon as possible.

USE TOOLS INCLUDING **NEWSLETTERS, BROCHURES, FLYERS, FACT SHEETS, POSTCARDS AND SOCIAL MEDIA** TO KEEP THE PUBLIC INFORMED AND ENGAGED.

Communicating with the Public

Communicating BEFORE MEETING	Communicating DURING MEETING	Communicating AFTER MEETING
Follow department procedure, ADA, and Title VI requirements	Project presentation	Post online all meeting materials including recorded presentation, project maps and other graphics
Give required public notice and add to website	Make available project information via links	Post responses to questions you could not answer during the live event, or post an FAQ that addresses topics that need clarification
Offer multiple ways to register for the meeting	Answer questions and accept comments	
Post meeting materials online and at a local library or public office	End meeting with reminder about how to comment and where to view question responses after the meeting	

⊘ VPI TIPS & TRICKS

VIRTUAL MEETINGS AND ACCESSIBILITY

- » Always provide a call-in number for your online meeting
- » Provide a contact name and phone number, and note that assistance is available to complete fillable PDF forms
- » Offer to mail hard copies of the materials being presented
- » Post the recording of the public meeting online
- » Have a longer public comment period after the meeting
- » Provide local library or Wi-Fi zone information on materials

CHECK OUT **PAGES 11-12** FOR MORE ABOUT **VPI** AND **ACCESSIBILITY**

ACCESSIBILITY AND **VPI** BEST PRACTICES

■ **Effective engagement is inclusive of all segments of the population. VPI provides many benefits for a broader reach; however, when not looking for the gaps, people can be left out.**

Make sure your VPI strategy includes the following activities:

- Reaching out to underserved people and areas that the project will affect.

- Providing materials and information so that communities with limited English proficiency can understand them.

- Providing accessible and ADA-compliant options for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, and visually impaired.

- Use GIS to evaluate where feedback is coming from, and use more direct engagement strategies to target areas where participation is lacking.

- Always include language that states assistance with fillable PDF forms is available upon request.

Questions to help identify and reach affected populations include:

- What are the demographics of the targeted audience?

- Are underserved, environmental justice or Title VI populations present? If so, what barriers exist, and what can you do to engage them through traditional and VPI strategies? Are special efforts needed to reach all populations?

- Does your target audience have internet access and they are likely to use? If not, add other outreach methods to the VPI tools.

- Does the technology has adequate capacity for the number of people who may participate using VPI tools?

- Are you reaching commuters? Make sure you're using tools that will reach people outside of the project area such as those who commute to or through it.

## Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliance

> Follow department procedure, and check accessibility of all materials, presentations, and documents. The Microsoft Office and Adobe software suites include accessibility check functionalities to improve your files so they can be better understood by everyone.

> Add closed captions to all virtual meetings and videos. Microsoft Teams and YouTube Live include this functionality and can be used for virtual public meetings. To use, open meeting controls and select *More Options > Turn on live captions*. Speak clearly, slowly, and directly in the microphone.

> Find practical solutions taking into consideration the nature, length, and complexity of your information and people's typical method(s) of communication. ADA requires public entities to make "reasonable modifications" to accommodate people who have disabilities.

> Include a notice on all public-facing project materials that states that accommodations can be made for people with visual or hearing impairments or other disabilities, and how to make those arrangements with the project team.

Presentations and videos must be closed-captioned before being posted to the web. Create a transcript that can be used as a starting point for closed-captioning. Closed-captioning companies can also can provide this service for relatively low cost.

MDOT will ensure that qualified individuals shall not be excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or subjected to discrimination under any of its programs, services, or activities as provided by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA.
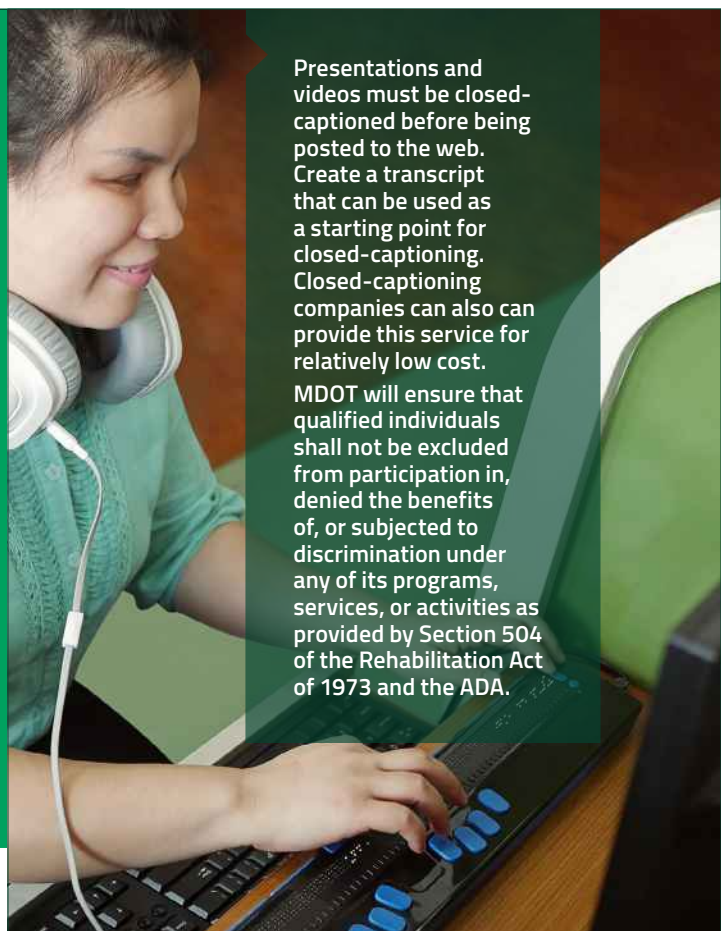
Reaching Underserved Communities

Partner with local organizations such as local food banks, community organizations and assisted living communities to disseminate information about public involvement opportunities through flyers, postcards and newsletters.

Make virtual meeting transcripts, presentations, and other project materials available by mail or store them at a local library or community center. In news releases, state how people can obtain the materials.

Use a multi-faceted strategy including mailings, community organizations, social media, and phone outreach in areas with poor Internet and broadband service. Target environmental justice communities with notices sent to mobile phones.

Offer or determine if documents and presentations need translation in advance of their release. Use EPA's EJSCREEN mapping tool's language filter to determine needs.

Reaching People with Limited English Proficiency

Explore local newspapers and websites to learn about community activities where information can be disseminated and collected.

Make it well-known in the study area and on all materials that MDOT or the project organization provides free language assistance to LEP communities.

Ask groups in the community about successful practices engaging LEP groups. Partner with community-based organizations for outreach.

Use plain language and clear graphics to convey project information.

Departments with Whom to Partner or Inform About Engagement Opportunities

The following organizations protect and advocate for the rights of people with disabilities:

- Michigan Department of Civil Rights:
  www.michigan.gov/mdcr

- Disability Network Michigan:
  www.dnmichigan.org

- Michigan Disability Rights Coalition:
  www.copower.org

- Statewide Independent Living Council:
  www.misilc.org

- Michigan Aging & Adult Services Agency:
  www.michigan.gov/osa

Build Accessibility Early into Your Outreach Strategies

Several commonly used programs include built-in tools to help build accessibility into your strategy from the start.

Adobe Acrobat Pro DC

The accessibility checking tools in Adobe's Acrobat Pro DC – **Accessibility Checker (Full Check)** and the **Make Accessible** action wizard – can identify many issues in PDF documents that may conflict with standard accessibility guidelines.

Microsoft Office Suite

In all Microsoft office programs including Word and PowerPoint, under the "Review" tab you will find a **Check Accessibility** option, which automatically checks your file for common accessibility issues, indicates areas to review and update, and provides tips on recommended fixes.

Webaccessibility.com

All digital content should grant barrier-free access to people with disabilities. For websites, that means meeting the standards set forth in the **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1**. This free tool allows you to enter a URL address to test the site's accessibility and offers recommended fixes.

Best Practices: Reaching Commuters

Getting feedback from people who travel to or through a project area is challenging, if they can only provide it during a local public meeting. Adding an online comment form, survey or virtual meeting to your strategy gives commuters more opportunities to engage and share their feedback, wherever they call "home."

» Social media is a great way to reach various people, no matter where they are located. Form partnerships with the surrounding cities and regional organizations, and request that they share your updates that are important to commuters from their area.

» When surveying commuters, consider buying targeted social media advertisements or buy advertisements on buses that the commuters are using or likely to travel the same path. Contact radio stations that are popular in the region as a whole to ensure you are hitting people not only in the city the project is located, but the surrounding communities as well.

» Partner, partner, partner. The key to keeping commuters informed is to partner with the organizations they are already following. For example if you are trying to reach truckers, consider partnering with trucking organizations in the state to disperse information and/or collect feedback.

RESOURCES

MDOT Department VPI Roles and Responsibilities

STRATEGY	VPI COMPONENT	RESPONSIBLE PARTY	OTHER MDOT STAFF
Citizen advisory committees	» Microsoft Teams	Project Manager	» Region Planner » Communications Specialist
Electronic project updates	» MDOT webpage » Email	Project Manager	» Region Communications » Lansing Communications
Fact sheets	» MDOT webpage » Email	Project Manager	» Region Communications » Lansing Communications
Social media	» Facebook » Twitter » YouTube	Region Communications	Project Team
Project newsletters	» MDOT webpage » Email	Project Manager	» Region Planner » Communications Specialist » Region Communication
News releases	» MDOT webpage » Email	Region Communications	Project Team
Public meetings	» Microsoft Teams » Surveys » YouTube » StoryMaps » PowerPoint » Brochures	Project Manager	Project Team such as » Region Planner » Region Communications » Lansing ESS Specialists
Public hearings* *FHWA does not allow only VPI to be used for public hearings at this time.*	» Microsoft Teams » Drive-in event » YouTube » StoryMaps » PowerPoint » Brochures » News releases » Legal notices	» Project Manager » Communications Specialist	Project Team

MDOT Project Champion Peer Contact List

PROJECT	VPI TOOLS USED	CONTACT NAME	EMAIL
Nixon Road Corridor Design Project, City of Ann Arbor, Washtenaw County	Online polling through A2 Open City Hall, surveys, email, social media, Nextdoor ads, Zoom meetings, video recordings, QR codes, livestreaming	Nick Hutchinson	NHutchinson@a2gov.org
I-94 Ann Arbor/Saline to US-23 Feasibility Study	MetroQuest, MDOT webpage, social media, email, targeted email lists, livestreaming	Kari Martin	MartinK5@Michigan.gov
M-28 Reconstruction, City of Munising, Alger County	Project website, social media, videos, livestreaming, MI Drive, crowdsourcing, survey	Dan Weingarten	WeingartenD@Michigan.gov
US-12 PEL Study, Campus Martius to I-96, City of Detroit, Wayne County	Social media, videos, virtual public meetings, real-time polling, virtual office hours, Street Mix, project website (not MDOT page)	Jon Loree	LoreeJ@Michigan.gov
US-131 to I-96 PEL Study, Grand Rapids, Kent County	MDOT webpage, MetroQuest, transcript services, targeted mailing list, email, GIS mapping, narrated PowerPoint presentation, Microsoft Teams Meetings	Nick Jasinski	JasinskiN@Michigan.gov
MDOT State Long-Range Transportation Plan	Email, MDOT webpage, videos, GIS mapping, targeted email lists, telephone town hall, livestreaming on YouTube, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Go To Webinar, WebEx meetings, narrated PowerPoint, MetroQuest and SurveyMonkey, transcribers for ADA, electronic comment forms, closed captioning	Brad Sharlow	SharlowB@Michigan.gov

Online Tools and Resources

- National Environmental Policy Act of 1969
- Title VI Act of 1964
- MDOT's Public Involvement/Public Hearing Procedures for Federal-aid Project Development
- Department of Technology, Management, and Budget (DTMB) directions and information about facilitating public commenting in Microsoft Teams

- FHWA Every Day Counts VPI Initiative Website and Resources
- EPA Translation Guidance/Equal Justice Screen
- ADA Michigan
- U.S. Census Bureau Data and Demographics
- Innovation Spotlight: Virtual Public Involvement (video)
- ASHA Hearing Loss and Remote Work Advice

VPI TOOL COMPARISON MATRIX

Category/Cost	Use	Tool	Selection Criteria
Comprehensive VPI Platform $$$$	Managing stakeholder interactions and correspondence across all projects	Initial deployment	Deploys a comprehensive management approach to manage, track and document VPI efforts using a department-wide platform such as PIMA
		Support, maintenance	
Virtual Reality Spaces $$$	Virtual equivalent to open houses, public meetings, project offices, community information centers	VR template, small space	As a single project application, consider using for large complex corridor projects that will have numerous engagement points or are presenting new concepts to a community
		VR template, large space	
		Small-space customization (per event)	
		Large-space customization (per event)	
Static Online Meetings $	Open houses, public meetings at which live presentation is not required	Pre-recorded streaming video	Traditional format that has been widely used by many stakeholders throughout Michigan. Likely to be a familiar format to local communities
		StoryMaps	
Live Virtual Meetings $	Public meetings, public hearings, or advisory group sessions where being live is required; assumes baseline presentation materials established would be in place before meeting	YouTube Live	MDOT has a YouTube channel through which a meeting can be livestreamed or posted on the web for later viewing. Comments can be turned on or off; if turned on, then must respond – either during the live event or later if meeting is posted on the web
		WebEx/ Microsoft Teams	MDOT's Microsoft Teams limits the ability to include an external group due to organizational security that blocks other VPNs
		Zoom	Includes accessibility enhancements but some may need to be purchased as add-ons
Telephone Town Hall $-$$	Work well when Internet access is limited or when trying to engage people who do not use the Internet. Cost for these services vary	Broadnet	Recommend for only audio-only events. Dial out to registered list to ensure they get a call
		Zoom/ Microsoft Teams/ WebEx	Can use these platforms and opt to not turn video portion on
Online Surveys $-$$$	Useful for collecting Title VI data and/or project comments or preferences; tools can vary in cost and use	Survey Monkey	ADA-friendly and good for Title VI data collection
		ArcGIS Survey123	Very mobile-friendly
		Metro Quest	Use with statewide or large projects. Great for reaching commuters and younger age groups on purpose and need and alternatives selection. Does not work well with iPad or certain mobile devices. Need backup survey or fillable PDF for enhanced accessibility. After survey is live, it cannot be edited or changed; plan for extra time to develop content, review
Project Web Presence $-$$$	Project website should be the hub for public involvement. Many other VPI tools can be added to the project website, clearly communicating the pathways for public engagement	Single webpage template	Update and inform large groups and individuals. Repository of all project information
		Single webpage	
		5-page Website	
		Web Domain	
		SSL Certificate	
Fillable Comment Form 🏃	Document with several options for submission. Can be emailed or printed and mailed. It can contain open-ended survey questions	Microsoft Word	Offers a structure for comments and questions. Can be used to develop a project contact list while obtaining input. Can be used as basis for Q&A document or website
		Adobe PDF	
Narrated Presentation 🏃	This is a great tool for sharing project updates. The presentation can be saved as a video and added to the project website; availability of the video can be communicated through social media and shared in a news release	Microsoft PowerPoint	Project and construction updates
Social Media 🏃-$$	Use MDOT social media channels to share in coordination with other strategies for increasing participation and awareness. Share meeting notices in advance and day-of on social media channels. Useful for quick and immediate information sharing	Facebook	Recommend using all for greater engagement
		Instagram	
		Twitter	
Public Access Cable TV 🏃-$$	Meeting recordings, videos, and/or narrated PowerPoint presentations can be broadcast	n/a	Great strategy to use in coordination with other tools. Internet connection is not needed
Drive-In Meetings $-$$	Identify a location with strong Wi-Fi and designate it as a place for people to park and log into a virtual meeting. This strategy can be used to distribute information and for in-person meetings if sound and presentation equipment is available	n/a	Excellent alternative to virtual meetings in areas with limited Internet access

Note: Synchronous VPI allows for a dialogue between individuals on either side of the virtual connection whereas asynchronous VPI is passive communication where an individual Asynchronous does not allow direct dialogue.

Production Time	Learning Curve	Synchronous or Asynchronous*	Notes
4 weeks	Intermediate	Asynchronous	Deploy once. Can use on many projects (single source of truth for stakeholder interactions). Includes: test and production deployment environments, configured/branded for MDOT; initial project setup, testing and dry run of 1 online meeting; training for MDOT staff on how use access and use
n/a	n/a		
2 weeks	Advanced	Asynchronous	Template created for small space, up to 6 interactions. Can be further customized per project event using a single, small-space template. Does not include the development of content at each interaction station
3 weeks			Template created for large space, up to 10 interactions. Can be further customized per project event using this template. Does not include the development of content at each interaction station
1 week			Update template to include project-specific content
<2 weeks			Update template to include project-specific content
<2 weeks	Easy	Asynchronous	Great for creating a linear narrative that viewers can play and watch all the way through. Typically developed as a screen-recorded PowerPoint with voiceover; different format options available for streaming, but YouTube is recommended. Assumes most content is already developed, such as project narrative, exhibits, mapping data, etc. Capture attendance and comments through PIMA, when integrated with the video as an online meeting
			Great for creating a non-linear story, allowing viewers to jump to sections of content in which they are most interested. Can include embedded videos, rich text, graphics and PDF links, as well as interactive maps. Assumes most content is already developed, such as project narrative, exhibits, mapping data, etc. Capture attendance and comments through PIMA, when integrated with the video as an online meeting
1 week	Easy	Synchronous	Can be streamed through a comprehensive platform such as PIMA online live meeting, and all attendees and comments are stored and responded to for reporting
	Intermediate		For live public meetings, WebEx can be streamed through PIMA, capturing participants and comments; Teams cannot (currently). If no storage for attendance or comments is needed, can use WebEx or Teams as a private, smaller event to share project status updates or advisory group meetings
			If no storage needed during meeting for attendance or comments, this option is quite simple for anyone to join. Includes the option for breakout "rooms"
1 month	Intermediate	Synchronous	Works best when using only audio component. When adding "access live" video, becomes overly complex and does not work well for comment period
1 week			May include additional fees that can be explored for toll free numbers and dial-out
2 weeks	Intermediate	Asynchronous	Preferably integrated with a PI management system to relate survey participation with other stakeholder metrics time is variable depending on the length of the survey and testing or iteration that may be required. Shorter surveys can take as few as 40 hours, while more complex surveys might require more than 100 hours
4 weeks	Advanced		Typically contained within its own platform and not integrated with other PI management systems. Shorter surveys can take as few as 80 hours, while more complex surveys might require more than 160 hours
<2 weeks	Easy	Asynchronous	
<1 week			Hosting through CloudAccess using Joomla as the content management system or CMS. Additional hours may be required to support custom graphics, branding, and logos. Content is the responsibility of the PI/communication team and not included in this estimate
<3 weeks	Intermediate		Hosting through CloudAccess using Joomla as the CMS. Additional hours may be required to support custom graphics, branding and logos. Content is the responsibility of the PI/Communication Team and is not included in this estimate
<1 week	n/a		IF NOT USING CLIENT PROCURED OR OTHER EXISTING DOMAIN: Procure URL through GoDaddy.com
n/a	Easy	Asynchronous	
<1 day	Easy	Asynchronous	Make sure to turn on closed captions.
n/a	Easy	Asynchronous	No cost; however, costs can be incurred if conducting paid advertising to reach a broader audience in targeted area
Depends on broadcasting	Depends on broadcasting	Asynchronous	Easy to moderate
1 week	Easy	Synchronous	

connects and is limited either to reading or seeing information and/or posting a comment versus asking a question or making a comment and having it responded to in real time.