



Virtual Public Involvement EDC-5 STIC Grant Project Summary

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This white paper is a recap of the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) Virtual Public Involvement (VPI) STIC grant project, which included interviewing pilot projects and creation of a guidebook and supplementary poster to inform MDOT and other transportation agencies across the state on best practices for VPI.

This \$30,000 project was delivered on April 30, 2021. FHWA STIC funds provided \$24,000 of the project budget; MDOT provided the remaining \$6,000.

VPI EDC-5 STIC Grant

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) State Transportation Innovation Council (STIC) Incentive program provides resources to help STICs foster a culture of innovation and make it standard practice at the states ([STIC Incentive Program Guidance, 2020](#)). MDOT, in partnership with the local FHWA office, through the VPI STIC Grant sought to develop guidance and aides for Virtual Public Involvement (VPI) best practices, tools, and lessons learned.

Pilot Projects and Interview Feedback Early 2020: Pilot Projects

To kick off the VPI STIC Grant project, the team was tasked with interviewing project leads from MDOT and city of Ann Arbor projects that adopted VPI components. The selected pilot projects were evaluated to assess the challenges, opportunities, barriers, and benefits that adopting VPI technologies had on the project and its team members. The pilot projects included:

- MDOT: I-94 Ann Arbor/Saline to US-23 Feasibility Study, 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 Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) Study, city of Grand Rapids, Kent County
- MDOT: Statewide Long-Range Plan
- City of Ann Arbor: Nixon Road Corridor Design Project, Washtenaw County
- City of Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Quiet Zone Study, Washtenaw County

Fall 2020: Interviewing Project Leads

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviewing the project leads was done virtually through Microsoft Teams meetings. In advance of each interview, 25 questions were sent to project team members. During the 60-minute meetings, interviewers went through the questions and documented answers, as well as recorded the virtual session for further review.

Winter 2020: Summarizing Pilot Project Feedback

The interviews with MDOT and Ann Arbor project leads provided feedback on the benefits and barriers that VPI tools provided, especially when deployed for the first time. To identify the key findings gathered from the interviews, a matrix was developed to summarize the feedback from each project. From there, the team was able to identify the major takeaways. Those included:

- VPI tools can reach a broader and more inclusive audience than solely using traditional outreach methods, increasing the return on investment.
- The pandemic sped up VPI tool acceptance and adoption. However, it also led to VPI fatigue during the first year of the pandemic.
- A hybrid approach - using both traditional and VPI tools - is the most effective. This is due to the decline in VPI participation with older populations and barriers to those without broadband access. VPI tools should not fully replace in-person engagement, but rather complement it.
- Project teams need more clarity on what tools will best reach those that identify under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and minority or low-income populations identified as Environmental Justice (EJ) populations.
- A virtual meeting “how-to” guide is needed to explain roles, software, etiquette, advertising, schedule, etc.
- There are too many tools out there and national best practice guidance is needed to break down costs, learning curve, best uses, audience, etc.

Due to the pandemic, some projects that were intended to have started earlier in 2020 were delayed. This included the Ann Arbor Quiet Zone Study and the MDOT US-12 PEL Study. Because of the delays, VPI tools were not yet deployed when the interviews were taking place.

Gathering Research

Winter 2020-2021: National Best Practices Evaluation

In addition to the direct feedback from the pilot project teams, evaluation of national best practices were also reviewed and considered before beginning the initial draft of the VPI Guidebook. National best practices were reviewed to create a comparison matrix of VPI platforms including all-in-one options a wide array of other VPI tools commonly used.

The evaluation of VPI platforms compared key features included:

- Public comment and response management
- Stakeholder management
- Event management
- Correspondence with the public and stakeholders
- Analysis and reporting
- Integration with other tools

The evaluation of singular VPI tools included:

- Online meeting tools
- Telephone town halls
- Streaming video services
- Survey platforms
- Website creation
- Virtual reality options
- Narrated presentations
- Social media
- Online and fillable pdf comment forms
- Public access TV meeting
- Drive-in meeting

Additionally, national best practices were also researched for areas where pilot project managers noted more clarity was needed such as the best tools for ADA-accessibility and reaching EJ populations.

It was clear following the interviews that the end product needed to be a concise guide to VPI tools that highlighted the benefits, barriers, and context to when and how to use them. Some specific feedback from the pilot project teams that helped to shape the final deliverable, included:

- Prefer a digital guide
- Content should be concise
- Include a run of show and instructions for moderating a public meeting
- Have a matrix that breaks down VPI tools by cost, learning curve, etc.
- Outline scenarios for which VPI tools for different types of projects and stages in the project
- Reference how to choose the tool to use based on project goals

Final Deliverable Winter-Spring 2021: VPI Guidebook

The content in the final deliverable, titled *Virtual Public Involvement Benefit and Barriers: A Practical Guide to VPI Tools*, brought together the feedback from pilot projects, national best practice research, and expertise gathered from MDOT, FHWA, and the HTNB consultant team. Effective public involvement strategies are developed in response to these 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 resident, commuters, or stakeholders in the study area?
- Why should people be interested in the proposed action?

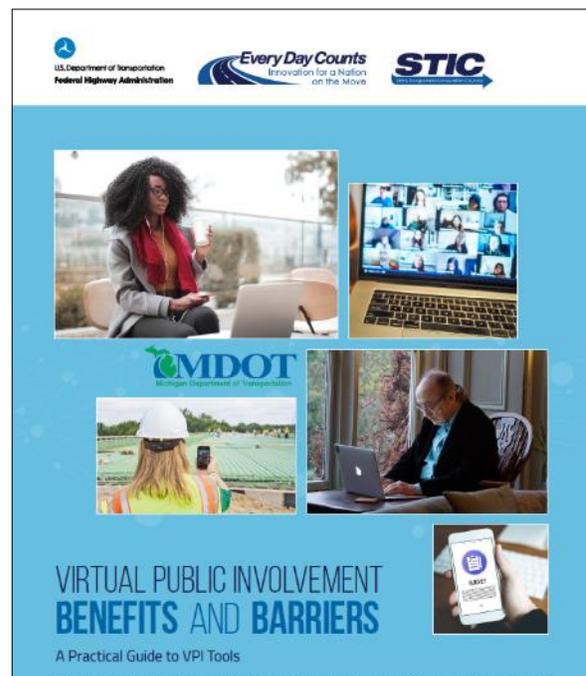


Figure 1: Final Deliverable Cover (Image links to website)

The framework for the guidebook was created with these questions in mind and how they relate to a project. The seven sections that make up the VPI guidebook include:

1. Introduction to Virtual Public Involvement

- Answers “What is VPI?”
- Provides data to highlight the importance of integrating VPI into project strategies.
- Lists common tools for transportation and planning agencies to use to increase reach and awareness, as well as to share information and gather feedback.
- Includes common tips and tricks for collecting and tracking public comments, getting the word out about a project including social media considerations, and maintaining civility in a virtual atmosphere.

2. Lessons Learned and Best Practices

- Summarizes the most common feedback from pilot projects and includes recommendations for best practices.

3. VPI in Practice: Choosing the Right Tools

- Provides an outline of three different scenarios - planning study, design project, and a construction project. Each scenario includes information about the project, the public involvement goal, and considerations for which VPI tools to use, what to use them for, and when to use them.

4. Virtual Meetings 101

- Outlines the full virtual meeting process - planning, testing, preparing, and following up.
- Includes common tips and tricks for budgeting, navigating the learning curve, ensuring key demographic insights are top of mind, meeting etiquette, and ensuring the meeting is ADA- and EJ-accessible.
- Provides options for the various types of virtual meetings, sorted by easiest to participate in and the most complex to execute.
- Explains ways to collect Title VI information during a virtual meeting.
- Offers advice for real-time online comment management, as well as how to handle comments before, during and after a meeting.
- Describes what issues to prepare for and how.
- Suggests VPI tools to utilize to communicate with the public before, during and after the meeting to ensure they have the most current information about the meeting and project.

5. Accessibility and VPI Best Practices

- Shares key accessibility practices that should be accounted for in every VPI strategy.
- Includes compliance that should be met for ADA that is specific to online tools and documents.
- Outlines how to reach underserved communities, people with limited-English proficiency, and commuters.
- Lists state departments to partner with to ensure ADA, senior, and EJ-populations are reached.
- Highlights how to build accessibility into a project in the early stages of outreach.

6. Resources

- Provides VPI roles and responsibilities.
- Lists contact information for the pilot project champions and what VPI tools were used in case future project managers would like to reach out to a peer for more information.
- Includes additional resources that provide a deeper dive into topics touched on within the guide.

7. VPI Tool Comparison Matrix

- Provides a comparison of common VPI tools used in the industry and includes the best use for each tool, various services that provide this tool, selection criteria, average production time, learning curve, synchronous or asynchronous, and additional notes that are relevant based on interview feedback and national best practice research.

Key Lessons Learned

- Different project locations and populations have different challenges. It is important to note that this guidebook includes a lot of options, but it should be weighed against a project's specific goals and the demographics of the project area.
- VPI has increased the reach for projects, however, it should not replace traditional methods.
- The learning curve of every team is going to vary. Project teams should do an assessment of the learning curve before applying a tool to the outreach strategy.
- Efforts should be made when planning a VPI strategy to integrate tools that are ADA- and EJ-accessible or look for alternative ways to include additional tools to meet these needs.

MDOT Information

The VPI Guidebook 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 the guidebook can be used by statewide transportation organizations and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) to implement VPI strategies into their planning products.