



# Convening Public and Other Transportation Meetings

with Underrepresented Citizens

## GUIDEBOOK 8

VERSION 2

*Guidebook 8: Convening Public and Other Transportation Meetings with Underrepresented Citizens*

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The full series of *Transportation Equity Toolkit* resources is available online at:

*Suggested Practices for the Transportation Planning Community*

<https://placeandhealthwv.com/transportation/suggested-practices-for-the-transportation-planning-community/>

The *Transportation Equity Toolkit* is a component of:

*Place & Health in West Virginia and underrepresented populations:*

<https://placeandhealthwv.com>

The website and its contents seek to reframe the way West Virginians think about and address population health less automatically as individual responsibility shaped by access to healthcare and more as the outcome of intentional policy decisions that leaders make about the places where people live, work, and play.

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# Guidebook 8: Convening Public and Other Transportation Meetings with Underrepresented Citizens

## Convening Public and Other Transportation Meetings



### *Introduction to Guidebook 8: Convening Public and Other Transportation Meetings with Underrepresented Citizens*

*Guidebook 8* addresses the many considerations that go into planning and conducting effective meetings or other interactions with underrepresented citizens. Considerations range from meeting in-the-field and conducting face-to-face discussions, to providing childcare and transportation, to creating effective visuals and handling literacy and other challenges. *Guidebook 8* also includes recommendations from social service and transportation planning experts about working with underrepresented citizens and the importance of equity in transportation planning.

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## ■ **Goals for *Guidebook 8: Convening Public and Other Transportation Meetings with Underrepresented Citizens***

*Guidebook 8* offers information about:

1. Holding and conducting public meetings and/or face-to-face discussions that are more accessible and convenient for underrepresented citizens.
2. Implementing engagement strategies that welcome, involve, and demonstrate a respect and understanding of underrepresented participants.
3. Recognizing comprehension and literacy consideration when working with underrepresented citizens and implementing methods to address them.
4. Developing visuals, illustrations, and PowerPoints using “best practices” that help ensure clarity of the message.

## ■ **Key Federal Guidelines Relating to Underrepresented Groups**



An important point to note before getting started: all federal agencies including transportation planning organizations are required to follow legal requirements and a code of ethics for working with underrepresented populations. These guidelines require, for example, that agencies avoid adverse impacts on underrepresented communities and ensure that these communities are not excluded from participating in or benefitting from federal programs. Convening public meetings and inviting underrepresented populations to participate are key ways transportation agencies meet these requirements. See Figure 1: Selected Federal Guidelines that Apply to Underrepresented Groups

**Federal law requires transportation plans to avoid a disproportionately high and adverse impact of transportation policies or investments on traditionally underrepresented communities.** For example, the Code of Federal Regulations, Chapter 23 (Highways) addresses public involvement processes to be used in statewide transportation planning. The law requires “a process for seeking out and considering the needs of those traditionally underrepresented by existing transportation systems, such as low-income and minority households, who may face challenges accessing employment and other services.”

Source: CFR Sections 450.210 and 450.316, [https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=a5bfe935cd4ac197fe6842736a981a35&mc=true&node=se23.1.450\\_1210&rqn=div8](https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=a5bfe935cd4ac197fe6842736a981a35&mc=true&node=se23.1.450_1210&rqn=div8); and [https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=a5bfe935cd4ac197fe6842736a981a35&mc=true&node=se23.1.450\\_1316&rqn=div8](https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=a5bfe935cd4ac197fe6842736a981a35&mc=true&node=se23.1.450_1316&rqn=div8)

**Executive Orders also direct Federal agencies to conduct their programs, policies, and activities to ensure they do not exclude persons from participation in or benefits of the programs.** Presidential Executive Order 12898, the Environmental Justice Order of 1994, requires Federal agencies to identify programs, policies, and regulations with a disproportionately high and adverse effect on minority and low-income populations. Presidential Executive Order 13166, Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency, requires Federal agencies to create a system by which limited English-proficiency individuals can meaningfully access agency services.

**Figure 1. Selected Federal Guidelines that Apply to Underrepresented Groups**

## ■ Convening a Meeting

This section describes strategies for holding meetings and engaging underrepresented group members. The ideas and recommendations presented are based on discussions with underrepresented citizens from Morgantown and Monongalia County, recommendations from social service providers and other experts with successful track records working with underrepresented populations or who have led successful transportation planning programs, and highlights from the literature.

### | **Two Approaches to Convening a Meeting**

Convening an effective meeting requires developing an effective approach. This takes time and effort—to determine the location and purpose of the meeting, the audience you want to engage, and strategies for interacting with the audience to obtain input and ideas.

One option for convening a meeting is the traditional way—holding the meeting at a location in town which requires citizens to travel to your location. This option, although usually not the best option, is most often used by government agencies.

A second option is to take your meeting to the citizens. Experience with underrepresented populations suggests that taking the meeting to them—to a location in their neighborhood or in conjunction with events or meetings that they already attend—encourages higher levels of attendance and involvement.

There are certainly times when it is necessary to hold a meeting in town and ask citizens to travel to you. But whenever possible, meeting citizens where they are helps ensure more people have the opportunity to engage in the process.

*Guidebook 6: Advertising to Reach Underrepresented Citizens—Determining the Message and Communication Strategies* discusses this same type of approach: shifting the focus from “expecting the audience to find you and your message” to instead “finding the audience and taking your message to them.”

The same is true for meetings. Taking the meeting to the audience can be especially important when people you hope to involve may lack access to transportation, or are dealing with many competing priorities that limit their ability to participate.

It’s important to do the homework to get an idea of best places to hold meetings. Talk with your contacts—underrepresented communities’ trusted allies and advocates including social service providers and other organizations that work with underrepresented groups—and ask for suggestions. *Guidebook 5: Reaching and Engaging Underrepresented Citizens through Their Trusted Allies and Advocates* offers information and recommendations about working with and through social service providers and other trusted allies.

According to one local social service agency administrator: *“How do transportation planners engage underrepresented citizens? Go to the sites where they are...Go when it’s their time to talk, respect their time to talk, don’t expect them to come and see you when it’s convenient for you. Go to their place of residence or business and ask them what they need.”*



## **| Timing, Location, Transportation, Child Care and Other Meeting Considerations**

The transportation agency should identify times when community members are available to participate in transportation planning meetings—whether in town or onsite in-the-field—and schedule meetings accordingly.

Underrepresented populations often work more than one job, and work many different shifts. Consider holding more than one meeting, and holding the meetings at various times to accommodate different schedules. That can mean evening meetings or weekend meetings, in addition to a weekday option.

People earning low-incomes often do not have a car and instead rely on public transportation, biking, or walking. Be sure to hold the meeting at a location that is either close to their homes or easily accessible by bus. That means the meeting location should be on the bus route, the meeting should be held during hours when busses are running, and the agency should provide bus passes if possible. Another option is to arrange for transportation, such as hiring a van to transport people.

Child- other family-care responsibilities or health issues can limit people’s ability to attend meetings. One solution is to offer child-care services at the meeting. All meeting spots should be handicapped-accessible and easy to enter.

### **Providing Child Care Can Make Underrepresented Citizens’ Attendance at Public Meetings More Likely**

*“Providing child care would make a big difference.” “If you’re going to [hold a meeting] in person, the assistance they would need is daycare.” “It’s good to have incentives, it’s helpful to provide a meal for families, childcare is important.”* Comments from local Social Service Providers

Onsite, in-the-field activities such as setting up an information desk during local or neighborhood activities, or piggy-backing on existing meetings and making a brief presentation can help reach underrepresented audiences where they are. Small meetings or more informal face-to-face discussions may be more comfortable settings for certain underrepresented groups or people who are new to the public involvement process.

In these instances, be sure there's a quick and easy way for people to provide input, and offer to include their names on a contact list so you can reach out to them for more input and let them know when formal public meetings or other events are taking place.



### **Be Creative with Meeting Locations!**

Meeting locations can be anywhere in the community. Transportation agencies and Metropolitan Planning Organizations have held meetings at shopping malls, agricultural and county fairs, neighborhood and community events, housing developments, libraries, senior centers, workplaces, group homes, and head start centers.

*Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Federal Transit Administration. Transportation Planning Capacity Building: Planning for a Better Tomorrow. Public Involvement Techniques. 4. Using Special Techniques to Enhance Participation. 4.B.d. Non-Traditional Meeting Places and Events. [https://www.planning.dot.gov/publicinvolvement/pi\\_documents/4b-d.asp#toc4b-d](https://www.planning.dot.gov/publicinvolvement/pi_documents/4b-d.asp#toc4b-d)*

## **Meeting Contacts and Locations Suggested by Morgantown and Monongalia County Social Service Providers**

*By working with the organizations identified below, it may be possible for transportation planners to go directly to an agency and meet formally or informally with its clients. Opportunities can range from meeting with clients in the agency's conference room or chatting one-on-one with clients sitting in the lobby.*

Make a presentation or meet people via Monongalia County Schools organizations, including parent meetings for Head Start; Early Head Start and its Parent Policy Group; and the schools' Outreach Facilitators

Meet with clients at Christian Help, Bartlett House, Health Right clinic, the Friendship Room, The Shack Neighborhood House, Scott's Run Settlement House, Rape & Domestic Violence Information Center (RDVIC), Monongalia Senior Center, Unity Manor

Go to homeless shelters; meet with clients and staff members—some staff members were formerly without homes or in recovery—*"they would be happy to be invited to the table"*

Meet with people at state festivals and county fairs...*"For people way out in rural areas, people come out of their hollers for the Buckwheat Festival. Get advertising out to those places, everyone will have access, could be helpful with planners...it's a lot of people in one place from all over the county"*

Work with pastors, downtown churches, United Way, Pantry Plus and More, Fairmont-Morgantown Housing Authority, Boys & Girls Clubs, Boy and Girl Scout programs

Reach veteran populations through Operation Welcome Home; reach people with disabilities via Pace Enterprises

Conduct meetings (or surveys) at worksites that employ underrepresented citizens, for example, Teletech, local hospitals, retail stores

*"Go to large housing areas where people need transportation: Marjorie Gardens, Bluegrass Village...trailer parks, multiple locations of transient housing, or long-term permanent housing... three housing complexes on North Pierpont, Canyon Mobile Home Park...Canyon Village Mobile Home Park"*

Transportation planners *"should be interacting with all employees, shoppers, and patients that must come [to Morgantown and Mon County] to get services...For example, four-five local hospitals employ people from all the surrounding counties...they all need to get from their homes to their worksites on the schedules they need. Current bus schedules do not serve employees who work outside of the 9-5 schedule."*

## **Reach Social Service Providers via the Family Resource Network**

Transportation planners can contact many social service providers at one time and get the word out via the Family Resource Network's monthly meetings. <http://wvfrn.org/monongalia/>

## **■ Challenges Faced by People Living in Poverty or Without Houses When it Comes to Attending Meetings**

It's important to understand the special challenges some underrepresented citizens face and why they may hesitate to attend public meetings. It's also important to remain non-judgmental when interacting with underserved citizens. Local social service agency administrators offer some insights into those challenges and how to facilitate interactions with these-hard-to-reach residents:

*“You have to meet people where they are. And I would presume that that's not happening in the transportation process. There's a lot of shame sometimes that people feel when they are living in poverty, especially with children. And so, when [transportation planners] aren't going to meet people where they are, or doing it without judgment, you're not going to be able to really seek out the issues that people have and how to fix them.”*

*“What we've had to do [with homeless populations], we need to have more than one meeting, multiple meetings to get feedback, rotating them around, to get the most buy-in, the most feedback...this population does not want to go into government buildings. They are aware they haven't had showers, they may smell...once [they] walk into an office setting [they're] out of [their] comfort zone and think 'I don't belong here.' That weighs heavily on our population...even if we really want their input, they don't buy it.”*

*“Clients won't walk into those nice offices...other people are all put together, clients immediately feel judged, we need to take that into consideration with this population: where do they feel comfortable meeting.”*

Using new meeting approaches to interact with underrepresented groups demonstrates your interest and concern to these new audiences. Taking the time to learn about best ways to interact with them, at their convenience, in their neighborhood, or in conjunction with events in their lives shows your willingness to obtain their input.

Many times, people do not get involved in community or public activities because they are never asked to do so. Being visible to underrepresented groups and reaching out to them—in other words taking your meeting to them instead of expecting them to come to you—can increase their interest and at the same time, enhance your agency’s credibility. <sup>2</sup>



### **Consider Virtual Platforms for Some Populations**

*“I’m still pushing that virtual platform...because I feel like you would be surprised at the turnout...When you’re dealing with people who are already housed...A lot of people have phones...we see most of our clients do have the ability to do Zoom. Even the older ones that may not be as tech-savvy...usually they figure it out...and they have opinions, and they like to voice their opinions too. So, I think it’s worth at least exploring.”*

A cautionary note, not everyone has a phone, be sure the people you’re trying to engage in a Zoom or virtual meeting have the phones they’ll need, including phones with enough data.

Comments from local Social Service Agency Personnel



*“Be sure a transportation planner conducts the meetings and interviews, not an intermediary. You won’t get the right feedback...you need to send the actual transportation planner vs. a representative.”* Local Social Service Agency Administrator

## **Strategies for Meaningfully Engaging Underrepresented Citizens During Transportation Meetings and Face-to-Face Discussions**

Morgantown and Monongalia County Social Service Agency Administrators and “boots-on-the-ground” social workers—people who work directly and regularly with underrepresented citizens and have gained their respect and trust—offer these suggestions for convening meetings that are welcoming and encourage meaningful engagement.

### ***Be Unconventional; Avoid Meeting Setups that Remind People of School Situations***

- “You may have to be unconventional” and avoid situations where the experts stand up front, the rest sit and listen...”I would see more small group interaction to get at the real issue.”
- “A lot of our folks have had bad experiences in school situations, so anything that seems like you’re in a school situation is uncomfortable for them. But I think working in small groups, with maybe an expert at the table, but just listening would be an awesome way to do that. And it would be very hard for the planners, because that’s totally not the way they’re used to doing business, but I think that’s going to be a more effective way than just expecting people to stand up in front of a whole group of people and speak.”
- “If you definitely provide child care...and also a buffet style dinner where they could go to small round tables...so it’s more of a conversation instead of a question and answer...maybe put a social worker with a family or two, and it’s just like a conversation over dinner, instead of a PowerPoint and ‘this is what we’re trying to do’... It’s just very informal communication...dinner and child care”
- “Lose the suits, lose the presentation, just sit at the table and talk. You need some structure, you can have an agenda and talking points, but give people the opportunity to talk, lose the formality, be on the level of the participants.”
- “You could use the social worker to be the mediator, to maneuver the conversation, pull [participants] in when appropriate...we don’t want a group of 10 [participants] going off in different directions, need to draw people back in and keep them on task. That discussion piece is important. [People] want to be heard...need a fine balance between a presentation and the need to be heard.”

### ***Hold Meetings with Underserved Citizens Separate from Meetings with the General Public***

- “If the goal is to really hear underrepresented populations, then you don’t necessarily want louder voices to crowd out what people are saying.”

- “I don’t think that you need to incorporate underserved into the general public. They might see someone they know that would get them not to talk or just be uncomfortable. In general, if you have someone in there, particularly like a louder white male, they could be easily intimidated. So, I think that you do need to distinguish between the two.”

And finally, be clear about the outcomes, about what happens as a result of people giving input. Follow up and show people the results of their input. “People appreciate that.”



*“If [transportation planners] are going to meet with people, don’t present, just go to a neighborhood meeting and ask. We want you to engage with transportation planners more frequently, what do you need? Where do you go? Talking to people with the concept of not having a car...vs. having a car”*  
Local Social Service Agency Administrator



### **| Creative Placemaking Activities Can Bridge Communication Gaps**

As mentioned in *Guidebook 1: Defining the Transportation Planning Problem and Doing Things Differently*, creative placemaking tools and activities rely on arts and culture approaches such as photovoice narratives, storytelling, role-playing, game playing, and drawing/painting. These activities can help convey technical transportation issues in nontechnical ways that community members can understand. They also provide creative ways for citizens to identify their own transportation needs and communicate them to transportation officials.

Creative placemaking tools can act as a bridge between transportation planners and underrepresented groups by providing new ways for expressing lived experiences and needs. These visual, auditory, and hands-on strategies also address literacy and comprehension challenges. Creative place-making can be instrumental in achieving transportation planning that is community driven, rooted in public participation, and embraces the community in its entirety.

A few Creative Placemaking examples:

[Photovoice Interviews with Morgantown and Mon County Residents](https://placeandhealthwv.com/transportation/photovoice/)  
<https://placeandhealthwv.com/transportation/photovoice/>

For this *Transportation Equity Project*, photovoice narratives were gathered from local Bartlett Housing Solutions Clients and the Client Services Manager. The narratives include photos illustrating the clients’ “lived experiences” along with their own descriptions of those experiences. <sup>3</sup>

Community Voices & Lived Experiences in Morgantown and Mon County  
<https://placeandhealthwv.com/transportation/transportation-community-voices-lived-experiences/>

This initiative (part of this *Transportation Equity Project*) offers stories of individuals living in Morgantown and Monongalia County who have little or no access to private transportation. People share stories of getting to dialysis appointments, grocery shopping, walking to work, working while homeless, and being a single mom without a car. <sup>4</sup>

Southeast Michigan: Creative Placemaking and Transit  
<http://creativeplacemaking.t4america.org/our-eight-approaches/incorporate-arts-public-advisory-meetings/local-examples>

Officials in Southeast Michigan held “Creative Community Conversations” using new partners and inventive approaches to determine the daily lived experiences of transit users. Citizens were able to showcase their experiences through artistic final products such as videos, photos, or books. Community leaders and members left the meeting not only with “pages full of notes, but with a deeper understanding of one another and a personal experience of how creative processes help build trust and understanding... As the community groups benefit from capturing the story of the work that needs to be done in their communities, [local leaders] also benefit from a better understanding of local transportation needs to inform their policies and plans for the region.” <sup>5</sup>

## ■ Matching Meeting Strategies to the Specific Purposes and Phases of the MMMPO Transportation Planning Process

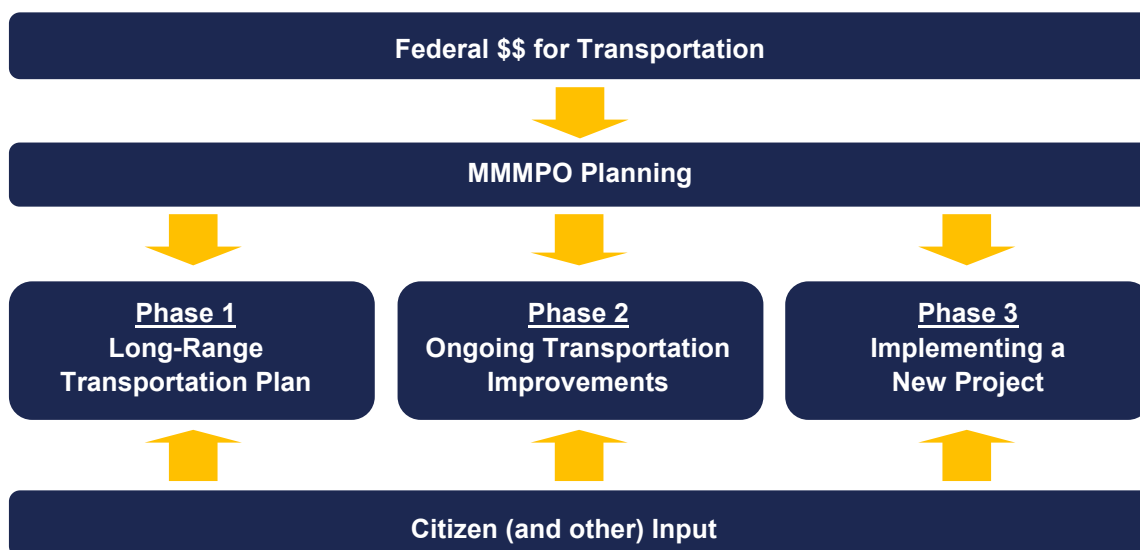
The Morgantown Monongalia Metropolitan Planning Organization (MMMPO) transportation planning process involves three separate phases, each with a different purpose and each requiring different types of citizen input (See Figure 2: Three Phases of Transportation Planning). The following discussion presents a few recommendations for matching citizen input strategies to transportation planning phases—to help achieve the end goal of developing transportation solutions in service to people and the community.



According to local transportation experts, this end goal of transportation planning is frequently overlooked in the planning and decision making processes. Instead, planning often focuses on cars instead of people and their needs. And this happens in most places around the county. “We’re not asking the fundamental question of ‘What do we need to get where?’ We’re just asking about capacity, [i.e. the number of cars a street or highway or intersection can handle] and how do we move things through.”

Addressing transportation equity during the transportation planning process can help keep the focus on designing for people and the community. “We really do need transportation equity to get the right answers,” essentially: What are we trying to achieve with our local transportation system? Is it just about moving more cars? Or should it be about bikes, pedestrians, and public transit as well? By neglecting the equity component—making sure the public has a say, including underrepresented citizens— “those people don’t even get a chance to play...we don’t care that they can’t walk, we don’t care that they can’t bike or that they rely on transit.”

What this means for the three phases of transportation planning is the need to include the appropriate citizen input in the process, vs. relying on a small subset of citizens that most often show up or giving priority to politics or to people advocating for special interests. In other words, there is a need to ensure people from all sectors of the community are involved.



**Figure 2. Three Phases of Transportation Planning**

## **| Three Phases of Transportation Planning**

Figure 2 illustrates the types of planning conducted by the MMMPO. To help manage the federal money that comes into Monongalia County for transportation projects, the MMMPO holds many planning meetings and seeks citizen (and other) input during each of the three major planning phases. Input can come from the business community, local real estate developers, local towns and leaders, technical experts, planning experts, stage agency personnel, government services, local civic groups, homeowners, neighborhoods, etc.

### Phase 1: Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)

Developing the LRTP includes a broad visioning process with many stakeholders and the general public to identify local transportation goals and the projects needed to address those goals. The LRTP identifies projects to be considered over a 10, 15, or 20-year time period.

### Phase 2: Ongoing Transportation Improvements and Decision-Making

This phase of the planning process includes the transportation improvement program, which involves monthly meetings and other ongoing interactions to address upcoming projects over a four-five-year period to make prioritization, funding, management, and other decisions.

### Phase 3: Implementing a New Project

When a new roadway or project is decided upon, the West Virginia Department of Highways—which must approve every WV transportation project—is required to seek input from citizens in the project area about its design and how it will impact their neighborhood(s) before finalizing plans and starting the work.

### Securing Citizen Input for Each of the Three Phases of Transportation Planning

During *Phase 1: Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)*, including a full array of representatives from all walks of the community helps ensure that the overarching vision and goals truly serve the needs of people and the community. Paying special attention to equity practices during this phase helps ensure better outcomes for all subsequent planning. It not only helps define good metrics—the goals, objectives and outcomes the community wants to achieve, such as getting all people to all of the places they need to be as cost effectively and efficiently as possible—it helps to ensure decisions are not based on political influence or clout.

For activities conducted during *Phase 2: Ongoing Transportation Improvements and Decision-Making* it is important to involve the right people who can speak to the specific issues at hand, including underrepresented community members. Incorporating equity practices into these meetings, which are more narrowly focused than the larger visioning process, involves constant monitoring and making sure the right people are participating at the right times.

*Phase 3: Implementing a New Project* involves people who are directly affected by a specific transportation project. The transportation planner is typically looking for specific input from a specific group of people, and the people involved will change with every project. To obtain public input, localized approaches such as door-to-door knocking campaigns could be effective in engaging citizens who live near a proposed transportation project.

In a small town like Morgantown, transportation planners need to be strategic and creative in the ways they engage underrepresented citizens and solicit input. The MMMPO has a limited budget and securing public input can be expensive. This *Transportation Equity Project* offers many suggestions from social service providers for gathering input from underrepresented citizens. It may also be helpful to create one or more citizen advisory groups whose members understand the processes and can be on standby to provide input, or to secure input from their underrepresented peers and serve as liaisons to the MMMPO. There is no one right way to approach these issues, and many small towns and rural areas struggle to address them. The key message from this *Transportation Equity Project* is to work with underrepresented citizens and their trusted allies and advocates to develop solutions that will work in this locale.

## **Remember to Seek Input from Underrepresented Citizens in the Western End of Mon County**

If transportation planners are seeking input from Monongalia County citizens, it's important to consider the western end of Mon County. "A lot of people live there and are treated like they're part of another county... they cannot get [to Morgantown], it's difficult if you don't have a car... people live there because it's less expensive, or they have family property." Local Social Service Agency Administrator

## **■ Keep in Mind Citizens' Short-term Transportation Needs**

While engaging underrepresented citizens in long-term transportation planning is essential, it's also imperative to understand their more acute, short-term needs such as bus schedules or lack of bus service, complaints about city streets, traffic lights, stop signs, or pedestrian or bicycle issues. Although there are a variety of ways local citizens can voice their short-term transportation needs, the official process is unclear and diffuse, spread across numerous local agencies and departments, and dependent upon citizens finding ways to submit their concerns. One exception is Mountain Line Transit Authority, the county bus service. Mountain Line has implemented a variety of outreach and engagement programs to solicit input from riders.

Research for this project indicates that citizens, especially underrepresented citizens, typically do not know how or where to submit their transportation concerns. One way to help address this problem is to include opportunities for citizens to present their short-term transportation problems when engaging them in the long-term transportation planning process. While the differences between long-term and short-term problems may be clear to transportation planners, they are less clear to the general public.

## ■ **Comprehension and Literacy Considerations for Underrepresented Populations**

Transportation, bicycle, and pedestrian planning meetings often address very technical topics, which can be unfamiliar to audiences, especially new participants or underrepresented populations. When interacting with people who have no previous experience with this sort of planning, it's important to present complex information in understandable ways.

Specifically, you'll need to create a meeting environment that provides a variety of ways for people to comprehend complex or unfamiliar information, and which offers people with literacy challenges different ways to learn and interact.

### | ***Comprehension Defined***

Comprehension is the process of fully understanding the information under consideration or study. To comprehend means to understand, know, grasp, and have a handle on the information. Ways people can demonstrate their comprehension of information are by explaining it, summarizing, paraphrasing, describing, or illustrating it. Using techniques in your meetings that offer participants the chance to demonstrate their comprehension in these ways will help you determine if they are comprehending the information.

### | ***Literacy Defined***

Fundamentally literacy means competency in a specific area. For the purposes of this training, literacy is considered to be the ability to read and write, speak and listen, and to understand visuals: i.e. reading, writing, verbal, and visual literacy. These are the primary communication methods you'll likely employ in a public meeting or other interactions with underrepresented populations.

This *Guidebook* is not designed to help you teach literacy, but rather to help you provide opportunities that allow meeting participants with different levels of reading, writing, verbal, and visual literacy to have a more fruitful and successful experience. In other words, to provide them every opportunity to participate and provide input in ways that work for them.

## **Literacy is Fundamental to Communication and Participation**

“Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen, and use numeracy and technology, at a level that enables people to express and understand ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, to achieve their goals, and to participate fully in their community and in wider society...”

*Source: Memorial Assistance Ministries. Literacy Advance of Houston: Transforming lives and communities through the doorway of literacy. [https://www.literacyadvance.org/About\\_Us/Defining\\_Literacy/](https://www.literacyadvance.org/About_Us/Defining_Literacy/). Accessed June 2019*

## **Literacy Levels in Monongalia County, WV**

Sixteen percent of Monongalia County citizens are at or below Level 1 Literacy—approximately 13,400 people out of a population of 83,750\*. This means “Adults at this level can be at risk for difficulties using or comprehending print materials. Adults at the upper end of this level can read short texts, in print or online, and understand the meaning well enough to perform simple tasks, such as filling out a short form, but drawing inferences or combining multiples sources of text may be too difficult. Adults who are below Level 1 may only be able to understand very basic vocabulary or find very specific information on a familiar topic. Some adults below Level 1 may struggle even to do this and may be functionally illiterate.”

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Skills Map: State and County Indicators of Adult Literacy and Numeracy, results of the assessment conducted by PIAAC (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies). <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/>. Accessed June 20, 2021.*

*\*Monongalia County, WV population estimates are based on the American Community Survey 2013-2017 five-year estimate. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/>. Accessed June 20, 2021*

## ***Comprehension and Literacy Characteristics of Underrepresented Populations***

Consider some characteristics of underrepresented populations related to comprehension, literacy, and participation in public meetings:

- They are not likely to have experience or feel comfortable in official or public settings;
- They may not be used to reading, hearing, or examining technical information; reading PowerPoint slides; reading documents and surveys; examining or interpreting visuals;
- They may not have experience or confidence articulating and voicing their opinions in public;
- They may have lower education levels;
- They may have limited reading proficiency;
- They may have limited English proficiency.

## ***Addressing those Characteristics***

Figure 3: Strategies for Addressing Comprehension and Literacy Challenges offers activities and solutions that can help address comprehension and literacy challenges.

Underrepresented Populations' Comprehension & Literacy Characteristics	Activities or Solutions
Lack of experience in public or official meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome and orient participants to the meeting from the moment they walk in the door</li> <li>• Conduct activities that will help break the ice, allow participants to talk and get to know one another</li> <li>• Make sure participants know how important their participation and input is to you and other government officials in attendance</li> </ul>
Lack of experience reading and understanding technical information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present information in smaller “chunks” to make it more understandable</li> <li>• Present the information in several ways that allow a person to either read it, hear it, see it (via visuals), or watch it being demonstrated</li> </ul>
Lack of experience or confidence articulating and voicing opinions in public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use smaller group activities in which participants can share their opinions in a less intimidating setting</li> <li>• Conduct one-on-one interviews/discussions</li> <li>• Ask questions that relate to participant’s experiences (tell me what happens when you walk to work on this roadway...)</li> <li>• Ask probing questions to help guide the participant toward expressing a clearer explanation or descriptive details</li> </ul>
Lower education levels and limited reading proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep information clear and concise, whether its spoken or presented via text</li> <li>• Provide information in a variety of ways -in writing, verbally, visually, and through hand-on, physical activities</li> <li>• Provide concrete and understandable examples to illustrate the point</li> <li>• Ask questions to determine if the participant understands the information – questions must be constructive and helpful, vs. judgmental</li> <li>• Keep written information at the 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading level or below</li> </ul>
Limited English proficiency (about 4 percent of people in Morgantown/Mon County speak different languages)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure a translator is involved in the meeting</li> <li>• Provide materials in the other language(s)</li> <li>• Conduct separate meetings for different language speakers</li> </ul>
Limited experience examining or interpreting visuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use visuals (photos or illustrations) that clearly illustrate the information</li> <li>• Use visuals that are simple and straightforward, without extra images that clutter or distract from the main point</li> <li>• Use visuals that the audience can relate to – familiar locations, familiar people, etc.</li> <li>• Explain the visual and the key points it’s making, and ask for comments/questions</li> </ul>

**Figure 3. Strategies for Addressing Comprehension and Literacy Challenges**



Working effectively with adults who have low literacy levels requires perception, patience and empathy. It is neither necessary nor recommended to draw attention to people who have difficulty reading. Rather, it is important to build a variety of instructional, communication and participatory approaches into the meeting or face-to-face discussion that offer people many ways to communicate, as presented in Figure 3.

It is also important to understand how low literacy skills can impact a person's experiences and perceptions about themselves. A 1997 study of adults with low literacy skills trying to navigate health care services offers some insights:

*"All participants described exposure of their reading limitations as a risky situation, to be avoided whenever possible. While the degree or perceived risk varied, most described it as significant in powerful, poignant terms. Fears were expressed that exposure would result in decreased self-esteem, self-concept, and social acceptance. One young woman noted: I don't tell anybody or say anything to anybody (about my illiteracy), they might think I'm a bad person.*

According to [one] middle-aged male participant: *It's hard to put into words the feeling the fear that someone else will find out...I'd pretend to look good.*

Feeling embarrassed and appearing 'stupid' were commonly cited concerns. Several expressed fear that their role as a competent adult, parent or family provider would be questioned and challenged if their illiteracy was known. These findings are consistent with Beder's (1991) description of the stigma of illiteracy as the situation of individuals disqualified from full social acceptance, stereotyped as unproductive, stupid, chronic failures, socially dependent, and morally deficient..."<sup>6</sup>

### **Prepare Meeting Materials so that Issues are Understandable to the General Public**

*"I've been in a meeting a long time ago, and it was very confusing. There was a lot of technical language. So, it has to be something that the average person can really understand. And the handouts have to be materials that people can relate to and understand. That's what I've seen in any meeting, government-funded, even city meetings, that it's difficult for people in vulnerable populations to relate to or understand what's being addressed."* Local Social Service Agency Administrator

## ■ Fixing Your Graphics: Visuals, Illustrations, PowerPoints

Visuals are an important way to interact with participants, keep their attention, and increase retention. “Visuals are powerful and natural ways for humans to communicate.”

- We are drawn to images
- We remember visuals more so than text and verbal messages
- Visuals help us learn
- Visuals help increase retention. <sup>7</sup>

### | *Why Your Choice of Visuals is Important*

During a meeting, you want participants to focus on the information and activities at hand. You don't want them to be distracted, struggling to see, read, or comprehend information in a photo, graphic, or PowerPoint. However, this can easily happen if a visual has too many details, too much text, no clear message or focus, and fonts too small to read.

### | *PowerPoint Design Recommendation*

For each PowerPoint slide you develop, you will need to consider the main message; text or visual(s) that best convey the message; text font and color; background color or design; and design/layout of text and visuals. Here are some guidelines:

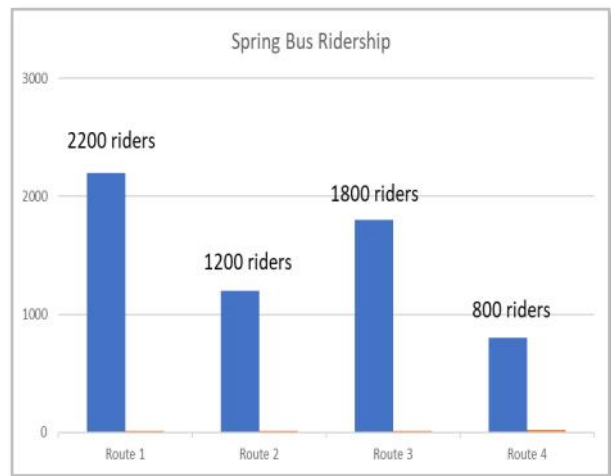
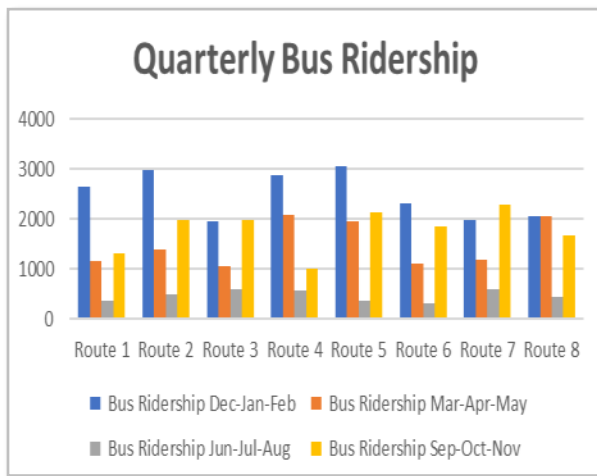
- Identify one main topic for each slide, with supporting information that is brief, simple, and clear;
- Follow the 5/5 rule:
  - No more than five words per line of text
  - No more than five lines of text, maximum;
- When possible, try to use one image with one brief, straightforward message;
- Select readable fonts, and choose font and background colors that work together
  - Dark text on a lighter background helps ensure people can read the text
  - Use 24-point text, minimum, nothing smaller;
- The background should not compete with the text or illustrations, keep the background simple;
- Use an appropriate visual that supports, clarifies, or illustrates the main point;
- Avoid using detailed charts; create a simpler visual or graphic that clearly depicts the information with a minimum of text and details;

- Use a simple design – not too many words, colors, or visuals; design should have one focus point that catches the viewers’ eye;
- The PowerPoint should support your verbal presentation, providing visual or written information to exemplify what you’re saying, rather than duplicate what you’re saying. <sup>8</sup>

**Example Illustrations of Effective Graphics and Visuals**

Below are some examples that illustrate effective design of graphics and visuals.

Example 1: Presenting graphs and data.



Which graph, *Quarterly Bus Ridership* or *Spring Bus Ridership*, is easier to read? The graph on the left (illustrating Routes 1-8) has too much detail and is difficult to easily comprehend. The graph on the right uses a simpler approach and readily draws your attention to the main points. To display data more effectively, find a way to simplify the presentation of detailed data into a clear and easily understandable graph.

Example 2: Text-based visuals vs. image-based visuals.

**Bike your way to better health**

- Increase cardiovascular fitness and stamina
- Decrease levels of stress and anxiety
- Increase muscle strength
- Decrease body fat and increase weight control
- Build stronger immune system



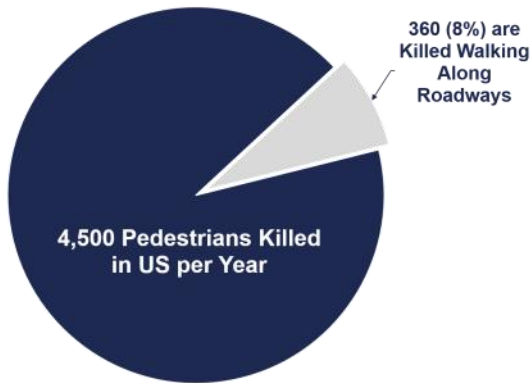
[https://all-free-download.com/free-photos/download/woman-riding-bike-on-path-along-river\\_596308.html](https://all-free-download.com/free-photos/download/woman-riding-bike-on-path-along-river_596308.html)

A slide that duplicates the presenter’s words has more to do with reading than illustrating an idea. In contrast, the slide with the photo enhances the presenter’s spoken words. The photo has more impact and clearly illustrates the main message, without requiring people to read. Instead, they can focus on what the presenter is saying.<sup>8</sup>

Example 3: Additional examples illustrate different ways of using visuals. Consider which of the following images attract your attention, and why.



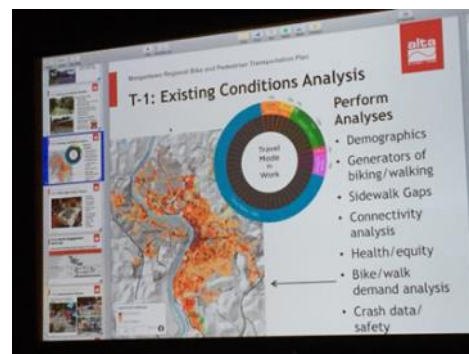
Data Source: O’Leary, S., Wilson, R. (2017). Center on Budget and Policy and American Friends Service Committee. 2017 State of Working West Virginia: Understanding Low-Wage Work in West Virginia  
[https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/5/WVCBP\\_SOWWV2017-FINAL-.pdf](https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/5/WVCBP_SOWWV2017-FINAL-.pdf)



Data Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration. *Safety Benefits of Walkways, Sidewalks, and Paved Shoulders*. [https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/ped\\_bike/tools\\_solve/walkways\\_trifold/](https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/ped_bike/tools_solve/walkways_trifold/). Accessed 6-20-21

## ■ Case Study: Observations of the Morgantown Regional Bike & Pedestrian Transportation Plan Meeting

The MMMPO conducted “Morgantown Regional Bike & Pedestrian Transportation Plan” community meetings throughout 2019 as part of its work to update the Bike and Pedestrian Plans. The observations presented below came from data this *Transportation Equity Project* collected after attending a meeting.



### ■ Observations of the February 5, 2019 MMMPO Bike-Ped Meeting

Figure 4: Observations of MMMPO Bike-Ped Meeting offers comments from Morgantown residents and college student meeting attendees. They were all middle class, educated, and white. Their comments are provided in different colored text in Figure 4; each color represents a different observer. Note that even with their middle-class status and education, these participants had some difficulty navigating the meeting and understanding the information. Imagine how much more difficult it would be for low-wealth citizens with limited education or low literacy skills.

Based on these comments, consider some ways the Bike-Ped Transportation Plan Meeting could be re-designed to better accommodate underrepresented citizens.

Positive Aspects of MMMPO Bike-Ped Meeting	Need for Improvement
<p>They really want to get people in Morgantown to be more active with walking and riding bikes</p> <p>They had a ton of voting opportunities... there was also a survey to get your exact thoughts, if you drove, walk, ride your bike and if you did why...</p> <p>We all got to talk to individuals who truly wanted to know how we felt and what they could do</p>	<p>---</p> <p>---</p> <p>---</p>
<p>Easy to participate in the written survey and pick tasks that were most important to us</p>	<p>Could have been another person or two assisting in these activities, especially when a good amount of people started to show up</p>
<p>---</p> <p>---</p> <p>--</p> <p>Attendees appeared physically fit and higher social economic status, perhaps joggers, bikers</p>	<p>Information on boards was complex</p> <p>Lighting was poor</p> <p>Assistants appeared uninterested in my personal stories</p> <p>Average pedestrian and homeless/carless not represented</p>
<p>---</p> <p>---</p> <p>The event itself was OK...</p> <p>---</p> <p>---</p> <p>---</p>	<p>The open house had very low visibility in the community, including the student body...</p> <p>As a non-car owner, I would likely not have been able to attend the meeting if my classmate had not provided me with transportation</p> <p>...Although the information was presented at a very high level</p> <p>As a public health graduate student, I was able to interpret the information, but a person lacking the required skills would likely have had difficulty doing so</p> <p>Data presented should be able to speak for itself, not require an interpreter</p> <p>Although the Metropolitan Theater is a beautiful and historic building, its lobby was too dark to host such a visually-heavy event</p>
<p>The event was well organized with a registration table at the entry way and a person at the table directing you to sign in and fill out a survey</p> <p>---</p> <p>---</p> <p>---</p>	<p>The survey was long and took some time to complete. It would have been helpful to have someone, a staff person, available to orient you to survey and its purpose, and answer questions</p> <p>As a first-time participant in a Bike-Ped Planning meeting, I would have appreciated someone speaking to me, personally welcoming me, thanking me for attending. Many in attendance were engaged in conversation and appeared to know one another, I felt a bit like an outsider</p> <p>There were many posters in the lobby, I had no idea if I was supposed to read them or if they had information I needed for the meeting</p> <p>Presenter's explanations and graphics were complicated and technical, it was difficult to follow and understand all that was being presented</p>

**Figure 4. Observations of MMMPO Bike-Ped Meeting**

## ■ Welcoming Participants to Meetings

As illustrated in observations from the Morgantown Regional Bike & Pedestrian Transportation Plan meeting, it's important to make the participants feel welcomed and valued from the first moment they step into the meeting. Consider the following welcoming scenarios:

### | Traditional Welcoming Activities

Registration table with a sign in sheet, a survey to complete, name tags, one or two people saying hello and asking participants to sign in, complete the survey, and fill out a name tag. Participant completes these tasks and takes a seat.

### | Alternative Welcoming Activities

Same registration table with sign-in, survey, other documents, and one or two people offering instructions. However, there are several other people solely dedicated to meeting and greeting people when they walk into the building or room, shaking their hands, exchanging names, and orienting people to the process.

“We’d like you to sign-in at this table using this sign-in sheet, then take a few minutes to complete our survey.” Offer two ways to complete the survey: written survey or verbal interview. Be aware of the fact that people may not be familiar with completing surveys, may have limited reading skills, and may need personal coaching. Another option is to ask the surveys questions during the session, using discussion and other strategies as an alternative to written surveys.

Setup posters throughout the entry-way and room that say “Welcome,” “Thank You for Attending,” or “We Value Your Input.”

Introduce new participants to meeting facilitators and others who are in attendance.

Begin the meeting with Ice-breaker games/activities that provide opportunities for people to meet, talk, and get to know others in the room. Some example activities can be found at:

*35 Fun Meeting Icebreakers to Warm up Any Meeting*  
<https://www.scienceofpeople.com/meeting-icebreakers/>

## **| Importance of Welcoming Activities**

Welcoming activities help set the tone of the meeting, right from the beginning. They give people time to warm up to the new environment. They help participants feel more comfortable, at ease, and less intimidated. They offer the chance for people to connect with one another. Ice-breakers that invite people to speak, even in a small group, sends the message that every voice is important. Taken together, these benefits contribute to building relationships that in turn can open pathways to meaningful communication and engagement.

### **“The Importance of Relationships”**

“You cannot effectively participate with people you do not know. Formal public hearings where agency staff never actually meet or interact with the public often fail because there are simply no relationships upon which to base communication. Relationships define the ability to fully understand one another and give proper consideration to one another’s needs, issues, and concerns. In designing a public participation program, you need to pay a great deal of attention to creating the opportunities to get to know key stakeholders and create the kinds of dialogue spaces necessary to build trust and understanding.”

*Source: US Environmental Protection Agency. Public Participation Guide: Process Planning. <https://www.epa.gov/international-cooperation/public-participation-guide-process-planning>*

## **■ Who Should Convene Public Meetings?**

Effective meeting facilitation is critical to a successful public meeting. Research suggests it is often the most frequently identified factor contributing to a meeting’s success or failure. A good facilitator will effectively manage the discussion, be sensitive in handling participants’ emotions, and possess excellent human and communication skills. Conversely, weak facilitation can result in a failure to manage the agenda, the time, and the participants’ input, interactions, and emotions.<sup>9</sup>

Often, public meetings are chaired or facilitated by local leaders or by contractors hired for specific projects. While these experts may understand the content at hand, they may or may not be qualified to facilitate a meeting. The best facilitators are generally process experts rather than content experts.



Facilitation has three basic principles:

- “A facilitator is a guide to help people move through a process together, not the seat of wisdom and knowledge. That means a facilitator isn't there to give opinions, but to draw out opinions and ideas of the group members.
- Facilitation focuses on how people participate in the process of learning or planning, not just on what gets achieved.
- A facilitator is neutral and never takes sides.”<sup>10</sup>

It is completely appropriate for content experts, local leaders, and facilitators to collaborate in planning and conducting public meetings. However, chances of holding an effective public meeting will improve if trained facilitators, who understand collaborative participation methods and have experience with underrepresented populations, take the lead in conducting the meeting. And regardless of each leaders' role in the meeting, a listening and understanding attitude is paramount.

## ■ Closing Summary

*Guidebook 8: Convening Public and Other Transportation Meetings with Underrepresented Citizens* offers numerous recommendations for planning and conducting effective meetings and other interactions designed to gather input from underrepresented citizens during transportation planning:

- Consider meeting with people in-the-field, at times and locations convenient for them, and holding face-to-face discussions;
- Provide amenities to facilitate people's involvement in transportation meetings and other interactions, including child-care, transportation, and food;
- Seek to understand the special challenges faced by people experiencing poverty, homelessness, or literacy challenges and adapt your engagement strategies in order to meet their needs and be sensitive to their situations;
- Consider the importance of equity and involving underrepresented citizens in all phases of transportation planning;
- Develop handouts, graphics, and other visuals following tried-and-true best practices;
- Consider hiring or using qualified facilitators to conduct public meetings.

Careful design and implementation of public meetings and/or face-to-face engagement in-the-field can help increase the level of participation and quality of input from underrepresented citizens, and in turn, contribute to the important transportation planning goal of serving the needs of people and the community.

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### **Hal Greer Boulevard Corridor Management Plan/Fairfield Innovation Corridor**

Example of a successful Huntington, West Virginia effort to engage underrepresented community members in transportation planning.

#### **Hal Greer Corridor/Fairfield Innovation in Huntington, WV**

“The Fairfield Innovation Corridor project is a complete and holistic revitalization of the area from 8th Avenue to the Interstate and from 12th Street to 28th Street. The initiative’s success to date relies on involving in the planning process residents, businesses, the faith community, and anchor institutions; strengthening existing community entities that provide services; and developing a master transformation plan that focuses on all challenges that face Fairfield while maintaining the culture and heritage of this traditionally African-American community.”

*Source: City of Huntington, WV (Website). Fairfield Innovation Corridor.*

*<http://www.cityofhuntington.com/residents/americas-best-communities/fairfield-innovation-corridor>*

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See Chapter 3: Public Engagement Summary, pp. 40-61

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## **San Diego Forward: The 2021 Regional Plan—Public Involvement Plan**

[https://sdforward.com/docs/default-source/2021-regional-plan/finalized-pip\\_san-diego-forward\\_2021.pdf](https://sdforward.com/docs/default-source/2021-regional-plan/finalized-pip_san-diego-forward_2021.pdf)

*The San Diego Forward 2021 Regional Plan—Public Involvement Plan* offers an example of a planning process—including a focus on transportation planning—dedicated to maximum public involvement, social equity and environmental justice.

## **San Diego Forward: Social Equity in the 2021 Regional Plan**

<https://www.sdforward.com/environment-communities/socialequity>

The webpage provides additional information about San Diego’s efforts to “truly promote social equity and environmental justice in regional planning [by] proactively engaging communities who have traditionally been underserved and underrepresented in the planning process.”

“Promoting social equity in transportation planning requires involvement from a wide variety of communities and stakeholders, particularly from underserved and historically marginalized communities. SANDAG\* (San Diego Association of Governments) proactively engages these communities in the planning and decision-making process and continually strives to improve methods for analyzing how transportation improvements affects those populations.”

\*SANDAG serves as the forum for regional decision-making for the San Diego region.