

Public Participation Plan
Upper Savannah Council of Governments

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INTRODUCTION

Upper Savannah Council of Government's (USCOG) policy is to support and encourage public participation and to adhere to the principles of the rural transportation planning process. The COG's public participation policy is designed to ensure opportunities for the public to express its views on transportation issues and to become active participants in the decision-making process.

I. BACKGROUND

Although the ultimate responsibility of rural transportation planning in South Carolina lies with the SCDOT, each COG has responsibilities similar to that of the Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), who are responsible for urban transportation planning. A portion of SCDOT's State, Planning, and Research (SPR) funding is allocated to the COGs to facilitate an ongoing rural transportation planning process. Each COG, in partnership with SCDOT, is responsible for implementing a transportation planning process that fully complies with the federal planning requirements established by SAFETEA-LU. Each COG is required to submit a Rural Planning Work Program (RPWP) outlining the planning emphasis areas and planning projects for the year. Through this process, each COG establishes regional goals and objectives, identifies the current condition of the transportation system, provides research and data analysis, and identifies and prioritizes transportation needs for input to the Statewide Multi-modal Transportation Plan and State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

USCOG also maintains a Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) that includes the following elements: system upgrade, intersections, safety, maintenance/resurfacing, signalization, mass transit, and bike and pedestrian facilities. Potential projects are ranked and recommended by the advisory committees to the COG boards based on funding availability. The long range plans include both constrained and unconstrained needs. The long range plan is updated every 5 years from the date of adoption, or as needed.

USCOG receives local input on transportation projects from its regional rural transportation advisory committee, which consists of representatives from local government, transportation providers, and special interest groups. The committee also invites representatives from the SCDOT, ARTS and GPATS staff, transportation providers, planning, zoning, and public works officials, and community leaders. This committee plays an important role in identifying, analyzing and prioritizing transportation needs and goals for the USCOG region and makes recommendations to the Upper Savannah COG Board of Directors, which is the policymaking body. Consequently, local governments are directly consulted and given an opportunity to identify transportation needs on the state system. The committee meets as needed to review project status, evaluate proposed modifications to the STIP, update long-range plan and funding priorities, comment on rural functional classification changes, receive input on the rural work programs, and coordinate special studies.

II. GOVERNMENTAL REQUIREMENTS

With the passage of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) in 2005, the previous seven (7) statewide planning factors were expanded to eight (8), namely safety and security were divided into separate planning factors. In addition, the planning factor on protecting/enhancing the environment was expanded to include "...promote consistency between transportation improvements and State and local planned growth and economic development patterns". The eight (8) planning factors of SAFETEA-LU are:

1. Support the economic vitality of the metropolitan area, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency;
2. Increase the safety of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users;
3. Increase the security of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users;
4. Increase the accessibility and mobility of people and for freight;
5. Protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation, improve the quality of life, and promote consistency between transportation improvements and State and local planned growth and economic development patterns;
6. Enhance the integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes, for people and freight;
7. Promote efficient system management and operation, and;
8. Emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system.

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

A. General Guidelines

The USCOG Rural Transportation Public Participation Plan is intended to provide direction for public participation activities to be conducted by the USCOG regional transportation planning committee and contains the vision, goals, objectives, and techniques used by USCOG for public participation. In its public participation process, USCOG will strive to:

1. Provide timely information about transportation issues and processes to citizens, local governments, affected public agencies, representatives of transportation agencies,

freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, private providers of transportation, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled, and other interested parties and segments of the community affected by transportation plans, programs and projects.

2. Provide reasonable public access to technical and policy information used in the development of the LRTP, STIP, RPWP, and other appropriate transportation plans and projects, and conduct open public meetings where matters related to transportation programs are being considered.

1. Give adequate public notice of public participation activities and allow time for public review and comment at key decision points, including but not limited to, the approval of the LRTP, STIP, RPWP, and other appropriate transportation plans and projects.

2. Respond to all applicable public input. When significant written and oral comments are received on the draft transportation plan (including the financial plan) as a result of the public participation process, a summary, analysis, and report on the disposition of comments shall be made part of the final plan.

1. Provide a public comment period of not less than 21 calendar days prior to adoption of the LRTP, STIP, RPWP, any amendments or updates, and other appropriate transportation plans and projects.

1. Coordinate its Public Participation Process with statewide Public Participation Processes wherever possible to enhance public consideration of the issues, plans and programs, and reduce redundancies and costs.

1. Periodically review the Public Participation Process to ensure it provides full and open access to all. Portions of the process which are found not to meet the needs of the constituency will be revised.

B. Public Participation Plan Vision, Goals & Policies

The vision for the public participation plan is that the public will be provided thorough information on transportation planning services and project development in a convenient and timely manner. The following goals and policies have been established.

Goal 1: To actively engage the public in the transportation planning process according to the policies contained in Federal and State law as well as in this Public Participation Plan.

A. USCOG shall maintain an up-to-date database of contacts including at a minimum the following persons:

. Federal, state, local agencies responsible for planned growth, economic development, environmental protection, airport operations, freight movements, land use management, natural resources, and historic preservation

. Elected Officials

. Local Government Staff

. Transportation Agencies (freight, airports, transit, etc.)

. Representatives of Users of Public Transportation

. Representatives of Users of Pedestrian and Bicycle Transportation

. Representatives of the Disabled

. Local Media

. Homeowners' Associations

. Civic Groups

. Special Interest Groups

. Individuals expressing an interest in transportation planning activities

B. USCOG shall, when feasible, electronically send and/or mail meeting announcements (invitations) to USCOG contact list or to targeted groups upcoming activities.

C. USCOG shall employ visualization techniques to depict transportation plans. Examples of visualization techniques include: charts, graphs, photo interpretation, maps, use of GIS, artist's renderings, physical models, and/or computer simulation.

Goal 2: USCOG shall keep the public informed of on-going transportation related activities on a continuous basis.

A. USCOG shall make all publications and work products available to the public via Internet, staff office, and employ visualization techniques to describe transportation actions as part of the LRTP.

B. Staff shall be available to provide general and project-specific information at a central location during normal business hours and after hours at the request of groups with reasonable notice.

C. USCOG shall maintain a Transportation section on the USCOG website.

1. The website shall be updated and maintained to provide the most current information available.

2. The website shall, at a minimum, contain the following information:

. Current USCOG Transportation Planning Staff contact information (i.e. name, title, mailing address, phone, fax, and e-mail)

. Meeting calendars and agendas

. Brief descriptions of current projects

. Work products and publications (STIP, LRTP, RPWP, PPP)

. Links to related agencies

Goal 3: USCOG shall encourage the participation of all citizens in the transportation planning process.

A. Target audiences shall be identified for each planning study conducted by USCOG, including residents, business and property owners and those traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations, including but limited to, low income and minority households, within the study area.

B. USCOG shall, whenever feasible, hold public meetings at a scheduled time, location, and building facility convenient to potentially affected citizens.

C. USCOG will provide an additional opportunity for public comments, if the final LRTP or STIP differs significantly from the version that was initially made available for public comment.

Goal 4: USCOG shall strive to continuously improve public participation.

A. USCOG shall continuously evaluate public participation techniques, according to the procedures contained in this Public Participation Plan.

B. The Public Participation Plan shall be reviewed and adopted, with revisions if necessary, at least every three (3) years.

Goal 5: USCOG shall participate in public participation activities for individual transportation improvement projects from the planning phase through construction.

- A. USCOG shall actively assist SCDOT, local governments and transportation agencies in the development and implementation of public participation techniques for planning and other studies.
- B. USCOG shall keep local elected officials apprised of projects in their jurisdictions and will help coordinate communication between SCDOT and local governments through all project stages, including but not limited to planning, funding, design, materials, ROW acquisition, and construction.

IV. CURRENT PUBLIC PARTICIPATION TECHNIQUES

Public participation is an ongoing activity of USCOG. An effective public participation plan is characterized by techniques and procedures that enable citizens to become well informed. This section contains descriptions of public participation tools of which USCOG currently uses or proposes to use in the future. These tools are as follows:

Charrettes

Description: Charrettes are typically intense, possibly multi-day meetings involving municipal officials, planning officials and local residents. A charrette is instrumental in identifying key issues early, promotes joint ownership of the solution and attempts to diffuse traditional confrontation between stakeholders.

Activities: Project specific meetings, corridor studies, sub-area studies, other planning studies and workshops.

Consultation

Description: As part of SAFETEA-LU regulations in encouraging more cooperative planning, USCOG will consult, as appropriate, with agencies and officials responsible for other planning activities that are affected by transportation within the USCOG region. To coordinate the planning function to the maximum extent practicable, such consultation will entail comparing LRTPs and STIPs as they are developed with the plans, maps, inventories, and planning documents developed by other agencies. This consultation will include, as appropriate, contact with the following groups: State, local, and private agencies responsible for planned growth, economic development, environmental protection, airport operations, freight movements, land use management, natural resources, and historic preservation.

USCOG maintains an open consultation policy, whereby any private citizen or entity responsible for transportation in the USCOG region may contact USCOG and be included in the consultation process.

Activities: Public hearings/meetings, copies of this plan on the USCOG website (for viewing/downloading purposes), meetings with USCOG Staff.

Display Ads

Description: These ads are used to promote meetings that are not regularly scheduled, such as corridor study workshops. They are published in the local section of the newspaper in order to reach a larger audience than those that typically read legal ads.

Activities: Project specific meetings, workshops, open houses or hearings.

Direct Mailings

Description: Direct Mailings are used to announce upcoming meetings or activities or to provide information to a targeted area, group of people, or the media. Direct mailings are usually letters, but can be post cards or fliers. An area may be targeted for a direct mailing because of potential impacts from a project. Groups are targeted that may have an interest in a specific issue, for example avid cyclists and pedestrians may be targeted for pathways and trail projects.

Activities: Project specific meetings, workshops, open houses, corridor studies, small-area studies, other planning studies or major activities.

E-mail Announcements/Internet Message Boards

Description: Meeting announcements and other information would be e-mailed to interested persons that have submitted their e-mail addresses to USCOG staff. Interactive message boards would be used to facilitate discussion and solicit public comment regarding specific USCOG projects or issues.

Activities: Corridor studies, small-area studies, other planning studies, regular meetings, public hearings, workshops, open houses, and other major USCOG activities.

Legal Advertisements

Description: SCDOT requires a minimum fifteen (15) day advertisement of any public meeting where a decision could be made that would make a significant change to an existing plan or program. Ads are published to solicit public comment and/or review of the

requested change or plan update. The ads provide a description of the meeting agenda, including contact information.

Activities: Corridor studies, sub-area studies, other planning studies, project priority process, major STIP amendments, updates of the LRTP and RPWP, and other major USCOG activities.

USCOG Master Database

Description: Staff maintains a master database of all contacts, both business and public, on a continuous basis. The database includes committee membership, mailing information, phone numbers, fax numbers, and e-mail addresses. The database is used for maintaining up-to-date committee membership lists and lists of individual with a special interest in USCOG activities including the media and public interest groups. Membership mailing lists generated using the database are provided to the public, municipalities and other agencies upon request. The database will be used to establish and maintain a list of e-mail contacts for electronic meeting notification and announcements.

Activities: The database is used to enhance other public participation activities.

Transportation Planning Website

Description: The transportation planning website is found within USCOG's website, under the link "Government Services Department." The site provides basic information about USCOG, transportation planning process, and staff contact information. USCOG publications and work products, such as the RPWP, STIP, LRTP, and PPP are available for downloading from the site. The site provides many links to other transportation related sites from the local to the national level. The site is maintained and updated by USCOG staff and an outside contractor. The website address is www.uppersavannah.com.

Activities: The site is used to promote regular and special meetings, planning studies, publications and work products. The mapping website contains an interactive mapping tool with which a user can create custom maps with traffic counts, base maps, road classifications, and many other useful layers of data.

Public Informational Meetings

Description: These are public meetings that are generally open and informal, with project team members interacting with the public on a one-on-one basis. Short presentations may be given at these meetings. The purpose of public informational meetings is to provide project information to the public and to solicit public comment.

Activities: Corridor studies, sub-area studies, other planning studies, project priority process, certification review, LRTP update, and other major USCOG activities.

Public Notices

Description: The USCOG regularly advertises meetings.

Activities: Regular meetings, other public meetings.

Small Group Meetings

Description: During projects such as planning studies, meetings are held with small groups that have an interest in the project. Meetings could be with homeowners or neighborhood associations, civic groups, special interest groups, or other groups of affected or interested parties.

Activities: Corridor studies, sub-area studies, other planning studies, and other USCOG activities.

Visualization

Description: USCOG recognizes that an important element to public participation is to provide the public, when possible, visual as well as written descriptions of transportation projects. Through visual imagery, the complex features of proposed transportation plans, policies, and programs can be portrayed at appropriate scales—region, local, project architecture, etc.—and from different points of view. To this end, USCOG will utilize various visual design techniques; some of which may include: sketches, drawings, artist renderings, photography, aerial photography, mapping, simulated photos, videos, computer modeled images, interactive geographical information system (GIS), GIS-based scenario planning tools, photo manipulation and computer simulation.

Activities: Planning Studies, STIP amendments, and other USCOG activities.

V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION POLICIES AND GUIDELINES

A. Public Document Review, Comment, and Approval Policies Program Adoption	Public Meetings	Comment Period	Accessibility
Long Range Transportation Plan	Annually	21 Days	Internet, USCOG Office
Statewide Transportation Improvement Program	As requested	21 Days	Internet, USCOG Office
Rural Planning Work Program	Internet, USCOG Office		
Public Participation Plan	Internet, USCOG Office		

VI. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION TECHNIQUES FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

Other techniques used for future consideration include:

Newsletter

Description: USCOG staff produces a semi-annual newsletter that is distributed to citizens, municipalities, media and other agencies. Citizens are added to the distribution list by request.

Opportunities to request being added to the list occur during public meetings hosted by USCOG on the USCOG web site and when citizens contact USCOG staff. Each issue of the newsletter includes staff contact information, upcoming meeting schedules; the USCOG web site address, project highlights, and current planning project status reports. When appropriate, information regarding significant transportation issues, USCOG awards, and other one-time activities are also included.

Activities: The newsletter is used to report recent planning studies, publications and work products.

Comment Forms

Description: Comment forms are often used to solicit public comment on specific issues being presented at a workshop or other public meeting. Comment forms can be very general in nature, or can ask for very specific feedback. For example, a comment form may ask for comments on specific alignment alternatives being considered during a corridor study, or may ask for a person's general feelings about any aspect of transportation. Comment forms can also be included in publications and on websites to solicit input regarding the subject of the publication and/or the format of the publication or website.

Activities: Public workshops, open houses, hearings, and other meetings, general USCOG activities.

Press Releases

Description: Formal press releases are sent to local media (newspaper, internet, and radio) to announce upcoming special meetings and activities and to provide information on specific issues being considered by USCOG.

Activities: Specific corridor or other planning studies, workshops, open houses, public hearings, and other special USCOG activities

Surveys

Description: Surveys are used when very specific input from the public is desired. A survey can be used in place of comment cards to ask very specific questions such as whether a person supports a specific alignment in a corridor study. Surveys are also used to gather technical data during corridor and planning studies. For example, participants may be asked about their daily travel patterns.

Activities: Corridor studies, sub-area studies and other planning studies.

Formal Public Hearings

Description: These are public meetings used to solicit public comment on a project or issue being considered for adoption by the USCOG. Hearings provide a formal setting for citizens to provide comments to the USCOG. They are recorded and transcribed for the record.

Activities: LRTP and STIP updates, corridor studies, project development & environmental studies, and other planning studies as needed for other USCOG activities.

Posters and Fliers

Description: Posters and fliers are used to announce meetings and events and are distributed to public places such as city halls, libraries and community centers for display. The announcement may contain a brief description of the purpose of a meeting, the time(s) and location(s), and contact information. Posters and fliers may be used to reach a large audience that cannot be reached using direct mailings and/or newsletters.

Activities: Corridor studies, sub-area studies, other planning studies, regular and special USCOG activities.

VII. EVALUATION METHODS, PERFORMANCE GOALS, AND IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

In order to determine the effectiveness of the public participation tools, they must be evaluated and compared to established performance goals. The typical methods for evaluating the effectiveness of public participation tools are surveys and quantitative statistical analysis. This section briefly describes evaluation methods to be used by USCOG. For each public participation tool, performance goals and methods for meeting those goals have been identified.

Surveys: Surveys typically consist of short, specific questions regarding public participation tools that are ongoing or that were used on a specific project. Surveys can be conducted in person, by phone, mail or e-mail. Face-to-face and telephone surveys provide quick responses and can be used when a respondent's answer may lead to a follow-up question. Mail surveys may be used to provide written record of respondent's answers. Mail-back surveys can be distributed at meetings, inside other publications, or by mailing directly to potential respondents. E-mail surveys, like mail surveys, provide a written record of responses. Surveys will be used to evaluate citizens' responses on the effectiveness of the tools.

Statistical Analysis: Statistics can be used to determine the "return on the investment" of producing public participation tools. For example, the number of persons attending an activity can be compared to the number of persons that were notified of the activity. This type of evaluation can be an indicator of whether or not the tools used for public participation are actually reaching the intended audience, or which tools had a greater response rate. Statistical analysis will be used to evaluate survey responses and most tools' rates of success will be compared with evaluation measures.

USCOG continually strives for improved public participation. Improvements should be made to increase public awareness and to improve the quantity and quality of information provided to the public. The decisions made by USCOG affect the entire population, both residents and visitors. Therefore, seeking public input on those decisions is vital to the success of USCOG as the organization responsible for transportation planning.