



# Northwest Rural Planning Organization Public Participation Plan

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# Northwest Rural Planning Organization Public Participation Plan

## Purpose

The Northwest Rural Planning Organization (Northwest RPO) is responsible for developing and carrying out the transportation planning process for the five-county northwest region of Clarion, Crawford, Forest, Venango and Warren to ensure quality and progress in transportation planning issues and projects.

Modeled after the Appalachian Regional Commission's Local Development Districts which are multi-county entities put in place to conduct regional planning for economic development, the Northwest RPO is one of four RPO's across the commonwealth conducting regional transportation planning through local decision making forums.

The Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) has been established and is comprised of 24 representatives from government agencies, private sector, elected officials, transit, aviation, and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. Through the collaboration and cooperation of these entities an open process for transportation planning has been established and required planning documents are in place; the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), the Transportation Improvement Program (4 year TIP), the Public Participation Plan, the Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Plan (CPTHSP) and the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP).

It is the policy of the TAC to have a proactive public involvement process that provides complete information, timely public notice, and full public access to TAC activities at all key stages in the decision making process. It is also TAC policy to involve the public early in the planning process, and to actively seek out the involvement of communities most affected by particular plans or projects. It is with the intent that the region's transportation plans and programs are developed in a manner that assures that the public, and affected communities in particular, are afforded ample opportunity to participate in the development of such plans.

The Northwest RPO's Public Participation Plan provides a framework for focused efforts to identify, seek out and engage populations that have traditionally been underserved by existing transportation systems, including: minority populations, low-income populations, non-English speakers and those with limited English proficiency, older persons and persons with disabilities.

The public involvement process is guided by the following federal mandates designed to ensure that planning and public involvement activities are conducted equitably and in consideration of all citizens, regardless of race, nationality, ability, language spoken or economic status.

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964:

*“...No person in the United States shall, on the basis of race, color, or national origin be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program receiving Federal financial assistance...”*

--Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (42 U.S.C. 2000)

- The President’s 1994 Executive Order on Environmental Justice, which states:

*“...Each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations...”*

--Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, 1994

- American with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990
- Executive Order on Limited English Proficiency of 2000.

The TAC will coordinate its public involvement processes with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, Clarion, Crawford, Forest, Venango and Warren counties, the Crawford Area Transportation Authority, the Transportation Authority of Warren County, the Venango County Transportation Organization and all interested parties.

## **1. PUBLIC MEETINGS**

### **A. Meeting Accessibility**

- i. With the exception of those meetings that are appropriate executive sessions, all regular meetings of the TAC and meetings of any project steering committees overseeing the development of the Long Range Transportation Plan, Transportation Improvement Program, corridor studies, or any other regional studies shall be open to the public.
- ii. Assistance for the sight and/or hearing-impaired, those with limited English proficiency or non-English speakers may be provided with advanced notice. When possible, written materials will be made available in languages other than English that are relevant to local populations.
- iii. With consideration to the geographical area and diverse topics of concern to the public, the Northwest RPO shall schedule meetings at facilities and at times which will encourage attendance by the general public, and that are accessible and accommodating to persons with disabilities, older persons and the sight and/or hearing-impaired. Where possible, meeting places will be accessible by

public transportation and shall be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

**B. Meeting Notices**

- i. Meeting announcements shall be posted on the Northwest PA Regional Planning and Development Commission's (Northwest Commission) website (<http://northwestpa.org/tac/>), included in the Northwest Commission's Newsletter and advertised yearly by way of an in-column legal notice posted in three papers providing coverage across the five-county region. In an effort to actively engage minority and low-income populations, non-English speakers and those with limited English proficiency, older persons and persons with disabilities, and other populations traditionally underserved by the existing transportation system, an announcement of regularly scheduled meetings and any special meetings will be electronically distributed via email for posting to all municipalities, the three transit agencies, and the five county human service agencies.
- ii. Upon request meeting announcements may be translated into languages other than English. With advance notice, written materials may be formatted specifically for use by devices to assist the sight-impaired.
- iii. All additional or rescheduled TAC meetings, or special meetings of the public, shall be posted on the Northwest Commission's website (<http://northwestpa.org/tac/>) no less than 72 hours prior to the meeting time.
- iv. Any special TAC meetings that may be necessary for emergency action shall be advertised in a newspaper of general circulation within the region no less than 24 hours prior to the meeting time, and shall be posted on the Northwest Commission's website (<http://northwestpa.org/tac/>) no less than 24 hours prior to the meeting time.

**2. ACTIVITIES SUBJECT TO PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

The Northwest RPO shall promote and provide for early and continuing public involvement opportunities throughout the transportation planning and programming process.

**A. Planning Activities**

Special emphasis shall be given to engaging the public in planning studies that form the basis for later programming decisions. Planning activities include corridor studies and special regional studies, and environmental assessment studies. These activities offer the public the earliest opportunity to participate in the development of project proposals that might eventually be programmed for funding. Thus, the Northwest RPO shall make an extra effort to involve the affected community through methods such as local advisory committees, and public information meetings.

B. Programming Activities

Opportunities for the public to participate shall also be provided for in the development of the Long Range Transportation Plan and Transportation Improvement Program.

**3. NOTIFICATION OF PUBLIC & STAKEHOLDERS**

The Northwest RPO shall make an effort to inform and engage both the general public and stakeholders as appropriate.

a. General Program

As part of its general planning and programming process, the RPO will try to involve the following: citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, providers of public and private transportation, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled, economic development agencies, and other interested parties.

b. Special Studies

For special studies that the RPO conducts, it shall make an effort to identify and involve persons and groups that might be affected by potential changes to the particular transportation service or facility under review. Examples include abutting municipalities, property owners, neighborhood associations, and businesses within the study area.

c. Outreach to Special Groups – Environmental Justice (EJ)

The RPO shall also make a special effort to seek out and consider the needs of groups or communities traditionally not well served by existing transportation systems. These include, but are not limited to low-income and/or minority households or municipalities identified in the Northwest RPO Environment Justice Analysis.

It is sometimes necessary to conduct an outreach effort to EJ communities, beyond that which is normally expended. At a minimum, the RPO shall identify groups that it needs to involve, add them to the appropriate mailing lists, and define methods for engaging them in relevant programs or projects. This requirement for special outreach efforts shall apply to both sections a. and b. above.

RPO efforts in this regard shall be consistent with the Environmental Justice Executive Order (EO 12898) dated February 11, 1994, and other related guidance from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA).

#### **4. ADEQUATE TIME FOR PUBLIC COMMENT**

The Northwest RPO shall allow reasonable time for public review and comment at key decision points. These include, but are not limited to, action on the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), and the Public Participation Plan. Minimum notification periods shall be as follows:

- Revisions to the Northwest Public Participation Plan – 45 days
- Adoption of the TIP – 30 days (to include a public informational meeting)
- Adoption of the Long Range Transportation Plan – 30 days (to include a public informational meeting)

#### **5. METHODS OF NOTIFYING THE PUBLIC**

The Northwest RPO shall use appropriate methods to notify the public of its activities and of opportunities for public involvement. Determination of which methods to use must be done for each individual planning project or study. However, the minimum requirements are listed below.

##### **A. Schedule of Meetings**

A list of the regularly scheduled meetings shall be published annually in newspapers with regional circulation, posted to the Northwest PA Regional Planning and Development Commission's website, distributed via mail or email to each municipality in the five-county region and posted to the Northwest Commission's social media Facebook site.

##### **B. Meeting Notices**

In an effort to actively engage minority and low-income populations, non-English speakers and those with limited English proficiency, older persons and persons with disabilities, and other populations traditionally underserved by the existing transportation system, announcements of regularly scheduled meetings and special meetings shall be distributed to each county planning, transit and human services agencies. For studies or committees that involve only a few municipalities, the notice shall be sent to the targeted municipalities of the affected communities.

##### **C. Public Comment**

Every meeting conducted by the Northwest RPO will include an opportunity for public comment on the agenda.

##### **D. Mailing Lists**

The Northwest RPO shall maintain mailing lists for each committee or study. Meeting notices shall be sent to all persons on the mailing list. Anyone may request that his or her name be added to a particular mailing list, by indicating the appropriate list and providing either an email address or a regular mailing address.

E. TAC Website

The Northwest RPO through the Northwest PA Regional Planning and Development Commission at [www.northwestpa.org](http://www.northwestpa.org) shall maintain a calendar of transportation-related meetings and activities on its website. The website shall also include copies of appropriate reports, maps and plans that individuals can access online or download to their own computer.

F. Legal Notices in Newspapers

Anytime the Northwest RPO initiates a formal 30-day or 45-day public comment period, notice of the opportunity to comment shall be posted in an in-column legal ad in the area's major daily newspapers and included in the Northwest Commission's monthly newsletter. Notices will be sent to county planning, transit and human service agencies, and all municipalities in the region either electronically or by regular mail.

G. Interested Parties

The Northwest RPO shall mail or email meeting notices to persons who have expressed a special interest in the transportation program, or any specific studies. Persons who have expressed an interest will be added to the appropriate mailing list.

H. Additional Methods

The Northwest RPO shall give consideration to alternative methods of involving the public appropriate to the project. Such methods may include, but are not limited to newsletters, distributing information through public libraries and community groups (especially those serving EJ and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) communities, the elderly and persons with disabilities), using open house format meetings, involving focus groups for specially selected topics, preparing press releases, social media, electronic messaging boards and holding events at special locations.

## **6. DOCUMENTATION OF PUBLIC COMMENT & RESPONSE**

The Northwest RPO shall document public comments received during the course of any and all studies or updates. The RPO shall also document how it responds to public comments.

A. Comments Received

Documentation of comments may be accomplished in a manner appropriate to the project and the nature of the comments. Documentation may consist of meeting minutes, a file of letters, or a special memo that summarizes the comments. A written summary is preferred at key points in the decision-making process when members of the relevant study committee must decide to narrow the range of alternatives, select a preferred alternative, or make a decision of similar nature. The written summary of comments made at public information meetings shall be given to the committee members prior to any committee action.

B. Response to Comments

The Northwest RPO shall provide a descriptive summary of how it responded to significant public comments during the development of a plan or document. The summary may be produced as a separate report or included as a short section in the final plan or document. If the final TIP or plan differs significantly from the version that was made available for public comment and raises new material issues which interested parties could not reasonably foresee through previous public involvement efforts, an additional opportunity for public comment will be made.

## **7. ADOPTION OF A “FINAL” LONG RANGE TRANSPORTATION PLAN**

The following describes the minimum public involvement process required during the review of a draft Long Range Transportation Plan. These steps must be taken before the TAC acts to adopt the draft document as the Final Plan.

A. Legal Notice

A legal notice shall be printed in the newspapers with regional circulation and other local newspapers as appropriate. The notice shall include a statement that translator services may be requested in advance. The notice shall be distributed via mail or email to each municipality in the five-county region and to each county planning, transit, and human services agencies in the RPO.

B. Comment Period and Public Meeting

The RPO shall allow 30 days for public comments and shall hold a public information meeting during that period. If the final plan differs significantly from the version that was made available for public comment and raises new material issues which interested parties could not reasonably foresee through previous public involvement efforts, an additional opportunity for public comment will be made.

Opportunity for public comment on the plan shall also be provided for on the agenda at every TAC meeting.

C. Summary & Disposition of Comments.

A summary of significant comments and the disposition of the comments shall be provided in the final document.

## **8. ADOPTION OF A TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM (TIP)**

The following describes the minimum public involvement process required during the review of a draft TIP. These steps must be taken before the TAC acts to adopt a draft document as the final or official document.

A. Legal Notice

A legal notice shall be printed in the newspapers with regional circulation and other local newspapers as appropriate. The notice shall be distributed via mail or email to each municipality in the five-county region and to each county planning, transit, and human services agencies in the RPO.

B. Comment Period and Public Meeting

The Northwest RPO shall allow 30 days for public comments on the RPO TIP and shall hold a public information meeting during that period. If the final TIP differs significantly from the version that was made available for public comment and raises new material issues which interested parties could not reasonably foresee through previous public involvement efforts, an additional opportunity for public comment will be made.

Opportunity for public comment shall also be provided at every TAC meeting during the comment period on the agenda.

C. Summary & Disposition of Comments

A summary of significant comments and the disposition of the comments shall be provided in the final document.

## **9. ACCESS TO TECHNICAL INFORMATION**

The Northwest RPO shall provide reasonable public access to technical and policy information used in the development of the Northwest Long Range Transportation Plan, the TIP, and any and all related studies, plans, and programs.

Visualization techniques such as maps, charts, photos, etc. may be used depending on the information to be conveyed to depict or describe plans and/or studies.

## **10. REASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN**

The Northwest TAC shall review the effectiveness of its Public Participation Plan process every five years to ensure that it provides full and open access to all. Or a revision or amendment of the plan shall be initiated when TAC members recommend changes or whenever Federal law dictates change in public involvement to correspond with current transportation planning legislation.

Minor revisions (typos/grammatical) will be accommodated without formal public notice, but major revisions will result in a 45-day public comment period prior to revision of the plan.

The public comment period will be advertised as an in-column legal advertisement in the three regional newspapers covering the Northwest RPO region and posted to the Northwest Regional Planning & Development Commission's website and social media

sites. Notice of the draft revised plan will be distributed electronically to municipalities and interested parties using the mailing list prepared for the TAC meeting notice.

The notice shall also be distributed via mail or email to each municipality identified in the current RPO Environmental Justice Analysis; to each county planning, transit, and human services agencies in the RPO; and any other interested party that has been identified.