

**ISOTHERMAL
RURAL PLANNING ORGANIZATION**



Public Involvement Plan

Adopted by the Isothermal Rural Planning Organization's Transportation Advisory Committee

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ATTEST:

TAC Chair, Isothermal RPO

Secretary, Isothermal RPO

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction	
A. Isothermal RPO	3
B. State Requirements	4
II. Regular Public Involvement Opportunities	
A. TAC and TCC Meetings	4
B. Public Comment	4
III. Public Involvement Toolkit	
A. Identify and Build Relationships with Stakeholders	4
B. Publicize IRPO Activities	4
C. Partner with Outreach Professionals	5
D. Outreach to Non-Participating Minority, Low-Income, Limited English-Proficiency and Low-Literacy Populations	5
E. Develop an Outreach and Education Program	5
F. Maintain Website	5
G. Produce and Distribute Newsletters	5
H. Create and Maintain New Forms of Technology and Media	5
I. Produce and Distribute Brochure	6
J. Hold Open Houses and Information Workshops	6
K. Provide for Public Input at IRPO Meetings	6
L. Conduct Surveys	6
IV. Public Involvement Structure	
A. Open Meetings	6
B. Access by Persons with Disabilities	6
C. Adequate Notice	6
D. Public Comments	7
E. Time Period for Public Comments	7
F. Format of Public Meetings	7
V. Implementation Plan	
A. Comprehensive Transportation Plan	7
B. Optional Public Involvement Techniques for CTP	9
C. Prioritization List and Local Prioritization Methodology	9
D. Planning Work Program	9
E. Public Involvement Plan Amendments	10
VI. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Provisions	10
VII. Title VI Plan	10
VIII. Limited English Proficiency Plan	10
Appendices	
A. Appendix A: Stakeholders	11
B. Appendix B: Local Media	13

I. Introduction

A. Isothermal RPO

Overview

The Isothermal Rural Planning Organization (IRPO) is the designated regional transportation planning entity for McDowell, Polk and Rutherford counties. In an effort to create intelligent and sustainable transportation systems, the agency seeks to find ways of including the public in all phases of planning. An effective public involvement process provides an open exchange of information and ideas between the public and transportation decision makers. Public Participation also includes education about the planning process and ongoing transportation projects. The IRPO seeks public input with a diversity of techniques, including but not limited to public notices, comment periods, workshops, charrettes, public hearings, newsletters, surveys, media relations, and the use of committees and work groups with citizen representatives as appointed.

The techniques employed vary depending on the specific planning task. The information and data collected through such techniques serve as a blueprint throughout the planning process. The Isothermal Rural Planning Organization's (IRPO's) Public Involvement Policy encompasses all RPO transportation planning and programming processes. These include the Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP), the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) and RPO's provisions for the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). Public involvement is an integral part of the IRPO's planning efforts. It is our belief that sound transportation plans are a result of involving the public at multiple stages of the planning process.

Purpose, Goals and Objectives

The purpose of the IRPO Public Involvement Policy is to create an open decision making process whereby citizens have the opportunity to be involved in all stages of the transportation planning process. This policy is designed to ensure that transportation decisions will reflect public priorities. It seeks to promote an active role by the public in the development of transportation plans, programs, and projects from the early stages of the planning process to detailed project development. The RPO implements and designs a combination of different public involvement techniques to meet the diverse needs of the public.

The goals and objectives of the IRPO Public Involvement Policy include the following:

- Bring a broad cross-section of the public into the public policy and transportation planning decision-making process.
- Maintain public involvement from the early stages of the planning process through detailed project development.
- Use different combinations of public involvement techniques to meet the diverse needs of the public.
- Determine the public's knowledge of the rural transportation system and the public's values and attitudes concerning transportation.
- Increase general understanding of transportation issues among citizens and elected officials.
- Make technical and other information available to the public.
- Establish a channel for an effective feedback process.
- Evaluate the public involvement process and procedures to assess their success at meeting requirements specified in the ISTEA, TEA-21, SAFTEA-LU, MAP-21 and the Interim FTA/FHWA *Guidance on Public Participation*.
- Carefully evaluate effectiveness of procedures used for public outreach and modify procedures following evaluation and public feedback.

3) Policy Elements

The IRPO's Public Involvement Policy is comprised of a number of sub-policies. All planning programs and activities go through the RPO Board public process. In addition, the RPO will initiate public involvement programs for Comprehensive Transportation Plans, Transportation Prioritization, the Planning Work Program (PWP) and the RPO's provisions for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The final component of the Public Involvement Policy is the policy review element

designed to ensure that the programs are meeting their goals.

B. State Requirements

The Public Involvement Plan has the following objectives as provided in N.C.G.S. §136-212:

- Develop, in coordination with NCDOT, transportation plans.
- Provide a forum for public participation in the transportation planning process.
- Develop and prioritize suggestions for projects that the organization believes should be included in the State Transportation Improvement Program.
- Provide transportation-related information to local governments and other interested organizations and persons.
-

II. Regular Public Involvement Opportunities

A. TAC and TCC Meetings

Both the Isothermal Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) and the Isothermal Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) hold advertised meetings on a regular schedule. These meetings are open to members of the public and, upon request, anyone can be placed on the mailing list for either committee. During each meeting, the TAC and TCC reserve time to receive public comments as a set part of their agenda. The public and concerned parties are welcome to provide public comment through telephone, email and in writing to RPO staff at any time. Regular Meeting dates are established at the beginning of the calendar year and are posted on the website or are available by contacting RPO staff. Special meetings may be called by TAC at any time and are publicized on the website or by contacting RPO staff.

B. Public Comment

The TAC typically acknowledges public comments in one of several ways. The TAC may incorporate a summary of public comments and the RPO's response, as an appendix, into the specific planning document. Or, depending on the number of comments, the TAC may instruct the planning staff to respond directly by letter. Acknowledging public comments is a way to let the public know that its comments are being addressed and is part of the public involvement feedback process. RPO staff can separate requests for data submitted by the public from the public comments. RPO staff can respond to requests for data submitted by phone or in writing directly, without submitting those to the TAC for review. Where the distinction is not clear, RPO staff will present the comment to the TAC.

III. Public Involvement Toolkit

A. Identify and Build Relationships with Stakeholders

In order to create and implement transportation plans with long-lasting benefits, appropriate stakeholders must be identified. RPO staff will seek to identify stakeholders that are critical to the success of a specific transportation plan or policy. RPO staff will create a Community Stakeholder Contact List. A Community Stakeholder is defined as any person or group that is affected by a transportation plan, program, or project, including those who may not be aware they are affected. In accordance with MAP-21, stakeholders will include "citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, 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. Citizens include the general public, environmental health, neighborhood, citizen, and civic organizations, and traditionally underserved communities such as people with disabilities, and low-income, minority, and elderly citizens.

B. Publicize IRPO Activities

Activities of the IRPO will be advertised by utilizing various media and social outlets. These activities may include distributing press releases to the media, inviting the media to regular TAC and TCC meetings, conducting radio interviews, posting public involvement activities on the RPO website, and presenting drafts of plans at social events. RPO staff will develop publicity strategies appropriate to the scope and timeframe of the specific project or plan. Articles, news releases and/or media alerts will be disseminated to announce public review and comment periods for Comprehensive Transportation Plans and other major activities. A current list of media outlets such as mainstream local

radio stations, newspapers, and small community-based publications will be established and maintained; the current list is available in Appendix B.

C. Partner with Outreach Professionals

In an effort to maximize public involvement, RPO staff may collaborate with outreach professionals as needed. Such professionals have long-standing relationships with the public and are aware of the various concerns expressed by the citizens they represent. Utilizing their resources to publicize RPO events and programs will promote increased levels of public participation. Presentations will be made to interested civic organizations on Isothermal RPO activities, the transportation planning process in general, or specific transportation projects. Presentations will be made by Isothermal RPO staff and/or NCDOT staff.

Public Outreach activities will include efforts to involve traditionally underserved groups (i.e., minorities, elderly, low-income persons) in the transportation planning process. These efforts may include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Identifying areas in the Isothermal RPO region with concentrations of minority, elderly, and low income populations
- Including organizations that deal directly with minority groups on the Stakeholder List
- Posting notification of meetings, public hearings, and open houses in county health departments and senior centers
- Publishing notification of Spanish translation availability for meetings, public hearings, and open houses

D. Outreach to Non-Participating Minority, Low-Income, Limited English-Proficiency and Low-Literacy Populations

RPO staff will create and periodically update a Community Stakeholder Contact List. Community Stakeholder Contact List will include neighborhood liaisons and representatives of organizations serving the populations historically underrepresented in the transportation planning process including minority, low-income, Limited English Proficiency and Low-Literacy Population. RPO staff will consult with the Community Stakeholders on the list on methods and opportunities to better publicize transportation planning efforts and opportunities for public input in the future.

E. Develop an Outreach and Education Program

Public involvement is at its best when the general public is thoroughly informed of the complex issues surrounding a project. Such outreach also includes informing the public and other agencies about the roles and responsibilities of the RPO. When necessary, the RPO will develop outreach and educational programs to inform various parties of the public involvement process for a particular project or to provide technical framework. English and Spanish materials will be a part of this program. Adequate outreach also includes taking different meeting times and locations into consideration in an effort to reach a diverse cross section of the affected population.

F. Maintain Website

The IRPO website is a tool that provides timely information to the public. Various Transportation plans are accessible through our website in conjunction with additional resources. Interested parties also have the ability to access updates on the status of specific plans and projects, along with the time remaining within public comment periods. The website provides dates of upcoming meetings and public involvement opportunities. Anyone can access the IRPO website at www.isothermalrpo.org.

G. Produce and Distribute Newsletters

The IRPO will provide information to be included as part of Isothermal Planning and Development Commission newsletter. The newsletter is distributed to Isothermal Planning and Development Commission board members several times per year, and is available to the general public upon request.

H. Create and Maintain New Forms of Technology and Media

RPO staff seeks to utilize all available forms of media in an effort to increase public involvement. Government agencies are taking advantage of progressive and interactive media formats to communicate with citizens. Strategies to encourage public input may include social marketing mediums such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Such mediums are not a required aspect of each transportation public participation plan, but efforts to include them will be made when deemed appropriate.

I. Produce and Distribute Brochure

A brochure will be created to provide interested parties with information about the IRPO and the planning process. Copies of the brochure will be made available to identified stakeholders and online. Additional translations will be created, upon request. RPO staff may find it appropriate to develop a brochure specific to a project, RPO policy or plan.

J. Hold Open Houses and Information Workshops

RPO staff may decide to hold open houses to provide the public with information regarding the transportation planning process, or to provide further information about a plan prior to a public hearing. These open houses are informal and allow the public to engage with the material in a relaxed format. The format may include but is not limited to maps of projects, PowerPoint presentations, and surveys.

RPO staff will be available to facilitate questions from the public or organization representative. Open houses also provide an opportunity to expand the RPO mailing list. Information workshops are topic specific and conducted on an as-needed basis. These workshops are informal and allow RPO staff to gain immediate feedback that may be incorporated in a transportation plan.

K. Provide for Public Input at IRPO meetings

Formal RPO business is conducted during TAC and TCC meetings. RPO TAC and TCC meetings allot time for public comment. These public comments are documented and become a part of the meeting minutes. In the event that the public is unable to make comments during a meeting time, comments may be submitted in written, verbal or electronic form.

L. Conduct Surveys

Surveys and focus groups allow RPO staff to directly collect feedback from the general public. Strategies for disseminating surveys will consider differences in language and technology access among affected citizens. Some methods may include inserting surveys in water or power bills, and providing links to surveys on government websites. RPO staff may also gather small groups of citizens to create focus groups that will provide feedback regarding a specific topic or transportation plan. The composition of a focus group may include residents of an affected neighborhood.

IV. Public Involvement Structure

A. Open Meetings

All RPO Committee meetings will be open to the public and subject to the North Carolina Open Meetings Law. All materials presented during RPO Committee meetings will be public record and made available for review at the Isothermal Commission office. Copies of archived records can be made available upon request.

B. Access by Persons with Disabilities

All RPO meetings will be held in facilities that are accessible to people with disabilities.

C. Adequate Notice

The IRPO will provide at least a week notice to citizens and media outlets of meetings in Accordance with North Carolina Open Meetings Law. Meeting notices will be posted on the IRPO website and publicized during IRPO events.

D. Public Comments

Public comments may be submitted in a number of ways. The IRPO will accept comments in writing, through email, by fax, with TTY (teletypewriter) or TDD (telecommunications device for the deaf), verbally at a public meeting, or during an RPO public outreach opportunity.

E. Time Period for Public Comments

Public comments will be taken no later than 5:00 PM Eastern Time of the day specified in requests for public comment, unless otherwise specified.

F. Format of Public Meetings

Public meetings allow RPO staff the opportunity to interact with citizens that may be directly affected by specific transportation plans. IRPO staff seeks to conduct meetings in a format conducive to generating public feedback. The general format of public meetings will include: a presentation by IRPO, NCDOT, or other appropriate staff; a question and answer period, and a summary of materials covered. Meetings may also incorporate using maps to identify where citizens are located, and an interactive activity.

V. Implementation Plan

A. Comprehensive Transportation Plan

Minimum Transportation Plan Public Involvement Procedure

The Isothermal Rural Planning Organization will provide opportunity for meaningful public involvement in the development and update of the Comprehensive Transportation Plan. The public comment period will be for a minimum 30-day period, effective from the date of the public notice publication. Written comments will be received during the comment period and will be directed to the IRPO. The IRPO will assemble all comments and forward them NCDOT. At least one public hearing for the Comprehensive Transportation Plan will be held. The availability of the Plan will be publicized using the media resources provided in Appendix B.

Purpose of Public Involvement Process

The purpose of the public involvement policy is to develop and implement strategies to inform and involve citizens in the development and update of the Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP). Public ownership of the Transportation Plan is critical to its success; the goal of the program is to ensure that policy decisions will reflect the values, needs, and priorities of those affected by the decisions (i.e. the public). The public review and participation process is designed to provide adequate opportunities for citizens and public officials to be involved in the CTP development. The public participation is designed to provide gradual progression from the general information (such as vision setting and / or formulation of goals, objectives and policies) pertaining to the plan to specific information regarding alternative scenarios and plan selections. Each public forum or input technique will use information collected at previous "forums" in order to build progression concluding with the adoption of the Transportation Plan.

Objectives

1. Encourage citizens to take a proactive role in the development of Transportation Plans.
2. Bring a broad cross-section of members of the public into the public policy and transportation planning decision-making process.
3. Educate the public and elected officials in order to increase public understanding of both the options and constraints of transportation scenarios.
4. Determine public concerns and/or perceived impacts of Transportation Plan elements.
5. Determine which elements of the Comprehensive Transportation Plan would support or diminish the citizens' desired lifestyle.
6. Establish a channel for an effective feedback process.

Optional Public Involvement Techniques (Comprehensive Transportation Plan)

As a method for increasing public involvement and participation in the process, the public involvement for the CTP may also include any or all of the following techniques:

1. Information dissemination, notification of meetings and publication of proposed plans will be integral elements of the public involvement process.
2. Proactive participation techniques may be employed to involve citizens and provide fuller access to information and technical data on the Transportation Plan. These techniques may include, but not be limited to, public meetings/hearings, surveys, focus groups, newsletters, public service announcements, charrettes, transportation advisory group, mass media, etc.
3. Public meetings may be held to formulate a vision for the Transportation Plan development, provide the public background information on the rural transportation system and other issues as well as the proposed framework of the Transportation Plan update process, and to receive citizen input.
4. Public meetings (forums) designed to solicit public comment may be held at various locations around the county or RPO area to encourage the greatest public participation. Public meetings should be held at a location which is accessible to persons with disabilities and preferably located on a transit route.
5. Copies of the draft Transportation Plan will be distributed to the member jurisdictions, citizen groups and agencies, and will be placed in the main Library. Notification of the draft Transportation Plan may be provided through various media outlets. The notification will inform the public of the availability of the draft Comprehensive Transportation Plan for review and comment where to send written comments, and addresses and phone numbers of contact persons. The notices also will include an announcement that states that persons with disabilities will be accommodated. Special provisions will be made if notified 2 business days in advance (i.e. having available large print documents, audio material, someone proficient in sign language, a translator, or other provisions as requested).

Additionally, the notice will inform the public that copies of the draft Transportation Plan are on file for public review at the Isothermal Planning and Development Commission office, available in a PDF format for downloading from the IRPO homepage, and at the main Library.

6. The public comment period will be for a minimum 30-day period, effective from the date of the public notice publication. Written comments will be received during the comment period and will be directed to the IRPO. The RPO's contact person, phone number and e-mail address will be included in the public notice.
7. Any significant revisions to the Comprehensive Transportation Plan will also be subject to a public comment process as described in this policy.
8. Involvement of the public in key decision points may be desirable. Decision points are those stages where the TAC may consider endorsement of the work in progress or take action on particular work elements. These may include some of the following:
 - Formulation of vision, goals and objectives
 - Review of multi-modal goals and elements
 - Review and approval of socio-economic and demographic projections
 - Review and determination of transportation deficiencies
 - Evaluation of alternatives and selection of preferred option
9. A local government, IRPO, and the NCDOT Transportation Planning Branch may occasionally agree to amend a Comprehensive Transportation Plan, in order to update the plan to reflect changed conditions or to better reflect transportation needs. Minimum public involvement procedures for Transportation Plan amendment include:
 - Posting a copy of the proposed amendments on the IRPO website

- Publicizing the proposed amendment and request for public input through local media outlets
- Holding a public review and comment period for a minimum of 30 days
- Upon completion of a 30 day public review and comment period, a public hearing will be held at or prior to the TAC meeting prior to final Comprehensive Transportation Plan amendment(s) approval

B. Prioritization List and Local Prioritization Methodology

Introduction

RPOs maintain and update a Prioritization List, a listing of local priorities for transportation improvements that is submitted to the state of North Carolina for their consideration in development of the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

Purpose

The Purpose of a Public Participation plan is to allow member governments the opportunity to submit local transportation projects to a regional Prioritization List, and to allow member governments to develop, within NCDOT guidelines, a methodology for ranking and applying local input points to projects. The RPO allows the public to comment on the final Prioritization List draft and the final local prioritization methodology draft. Citizens also have the opportunity to submit projects to their local RPO representatives for consideration in the Prioritization List.

Public Involvement Process

1. The RPO TCC develops the draft Prioritization List and local prioritization methodology and the drafts are approved by the TAC. TAC and TCC meetings are open to the public. Public comments can be made at all meetings.
2. The local prioritization methodology is posted for public review for a 30-day period on the RPO website, with notification submitted to local media. The public review of the draft Prioritization list will run for 14 days. The public review periods for the Prioritization List and the local prioritization methodology will sometimes be concurrent and sometimes will run separately, depending upon which schedule is more practical. Written comments will be received during the comment period and will be directed to the IRPO. The RPO's contact person, phone number and e-mail address will be included in the public notice.
3. A public hearing is held the final day of the public comment period, or during the first TAC meeting after the public comment period, to receive public comments on the draft Prioritization List and local prioritization methodology.
4. Final drafts are approved by the TAC and submitted to NCDOT.
5. Any changes to the draft Prioritization lists will be published on the RPO's website along with the rationale for the change.

D. Planning Work Program (PWP)

Introduction

The PWP must identify the RPO planning tasks to be undertaken with the use of federal transportation funds, including highway and transit.

Purpose

The purpose of public involvement in the PWP process is to keep the public apprised of and to receive input on the planning activities to be undertaken by the Rural Planning Organization.

Public Involvement Process

1. The IRPO compiles a draft Planning Work Program for the upcoming State fiscal year, considering tasks requested by local government members.
2. The draft is sent to the Transportation Planning Branch for comments.
3. The draft Planning Work Program is reviewed by TAC/TCC at their meetings. The TCC/TAC meetings are open to the public and have a public comment period.
4. The final PWP is approved by TAC. Upon TAC approval, the PWP is then forwarded on to the State.
6. Amendments to the PWP, when required, are administered similarly to approvals of new PWPs, with the same Public Involvement Process as described above.

E. Public Involvement Plan (PIP) Amendments

Purpose

The purpose of public involvement in the amendment of the Public Involvement Plan is to keep the public informed and to allow them to provide feedback on the public involvement policies and procedures of the Isothermal RPO.

Public Involvement Process

Amendments to the Public Involvement Plan will require the approval of the TAC before becoming effective with the exception of the periodic updating of the Appendices, which will be handled by RPO staff.

VI. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Provisions

All notices for planning activities of the Isothermal Rural Planning Organization will include an announcement that states that persons with disabilities will be accommodated. Special provisions will be made if notified 2 business days in advance (i.e. having available large print documents, audio material, someone proficient in sign language, a translator or other provisions requested). Notices for the public comment period and the public hearing will be advertised using the media list described in Appendix B. Public meetings will be held in locations accessible to persons with disabilities and will be located near or on a transit route if possible. IRPO staff will utilize the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services database of sign language interpreters in our region to secure a sign language interpreter for a scheduled meeting upon request. Currently the database is available at <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dsdhh/directories.htm>

VII. Title VI Plan

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in programs and activities receiving Federal financial assistance. Specifically, Title VI provides that “no person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (42 U.S.C. Section 2000d). The IRPO adheres to the Public Involvement Policy for Title VI-related issues and includes the Title VI Plan in this document by this reference.

VIII. Limited English Proficiency Plan

This Public Involvement Policy was developed to guide IRPO in its public outreach and compliance with Executive Order 13166, Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency (2000) and is included in this plan by this reference.

Appendix A: Stakeholders

Local Governments

McDowell County

City of Marion

Town of Old Fort

Polk County

Town of Columbus

City of Saluda

Town of Tryon

Rutherford County

Town of Bostic

Chimney Rock Village

Town of Ellenboro

Town of Forest City

Town of Lake Lure

Town of Ruth

Town of Rutherfordton

Town of Spindale

State Government Agencies

North Carolina Department of Transportation

Chambers of Commerce

McDowell County Chamber of Commerce

Polk County Chamber of Commerce

Hickory Nut Gorge Chamber of Commerce

Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce

Economic Development Corporations/Commissions

AdvantageWest – Western North Carolina Economic Development Commission

Future Forward Economic Alliance

Rutherford County Economic Commission

Polk County Economic Development Commission

McDowell County Economic Development Commission

Regional Organizations

Isothermal Planning and Development Commission

Land of Sky Rural Planning Organization

High Country Rural Planning Organization

Unifour Rural Planning Organization

Lake Norman Rural Planning Organization

French Broad River Metropolitan Rural Planning Organization

Appalachian Council of Governments (SC)

Public Transportation Providers

McDowell County Transportation Planning Board, Inc.

Polk County Transit Authority

Rutherford County Transit

Historic Preservation Organizations

Historic Preservation Commission, Rutherfordton

The Polk County Historical Association

Historic Preservation Commission, McDowell County

Environmental Organizations

Pacolet Area Conservancy

Keep McDowell Beautiful

Lake James Environmental Association

Civic Organizations

Kiwanis, Forest City Chapter

Rotary Club, Spindale

Senior Centers

McDowell County Senior Center

Polk County Senior Center

Rutherford County Senior Center

Taxi Companies

Not applicable

Motor Freight Carriers

Truck Service, Inc.

Appendix B: Media Contacts

Newspapers

The McDowell News news@mcdowellnews.com

Tryon Daily Bulletin news@tryondailybulletin.com

The Daily Courier Jean Gordon, jgordon@thedigitalcourier.com

Radio

88.7 WNCW Public Service Announcement psa@wncw.org

Public Access Television

Not applicable