

Transportation Public Involvement Annual Performance Report: FY2020

This report was written in accordance with the North Central Texas Council of Governments' Transportation Department Public Participation Plan, which was most recently updated in November 2018, as approved by the Regional Transportation Council (RTC), the transportation policy board for the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). In March 2020, the Regional Transportation Council amended the Public Participation Plan to provide rules for how the public may submit comments at the beginning of a Regional Transportation Council meeting, in accordance with HB 2840 (86th Texas Legislature). The reporting period for the performance metrics included in this report is Oct. 1, 2019 through Sept. 30, 2020, which corresponds to the fiscal year.

The Transportation Department seeks to engage the public through a variety of means, both mandated and voluntary: public meetings, community events, online public input opportunities, media outreach, social media, email, website, publications, speaking opportunities, and community partnerships. In addition to a presentation of quantitative metrics, this report provides a summary and qualitative analysis of the Department's public involvement efforts over the past year.

Traditional Outreach

Public involvement in FY2020 was markedly different from past years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which began to affect North Texas in early March 2020. The lockdown, social distancing policies, and widespread restrictions on meetings and assemblies meant public involvement was conducted exclusively online for more than half the year. In general, both public attention and media coverage concentrated on the pandemic and consequent economic recession, which also occurred amidst nationwide protests during a presidential election year. The confluence of events meant transportation issues were not a primary concern for many North Texas residents.

The Department did have a strong media presence throughout the year, although it was somewhat diminished from FY 2019. The Department sent out 23 press releases to 198 reporters at 142 news outlets through print, online, radio, television and podcast. Most reporters were based in the region and represented all 12 counties comprising the Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA). These efforts resulted in 62 media requests for information or staff interviews and 169 mentions in the media. Before March 2020, media coverage focused on high-speed transportation, bicycle/pedestrian/sustainable development, and the Panther Island development in Fort Worth. After the pandemic began, the media turned its attention to the impact of COVID-19 on transportation, especially transit ridership and economic stimulus funding.

Media outreach was an important component of notifying the public of input opportunities related to the Department's plans and programs. Despite the limitations on in-person public involvement in the latter part of the year, public input opportunities continued online. On March 16, Governor Greg Abbott suspended certain statutes, including provisions of the Texas Open Meetings Act, in accordance with Texas Government Code Section 418.016. Because the Public Participation Plan already outlines circumstances in which public input opportunities may be held solely online, and NCTCOG had previously hosted several online-only public input opportunities, the Department was able to transition to an online-only format for all input opportunities with relative ease. In total, the Department hosted two public meetings and seven online opportunities. Meeting attendance was generally low, in keeping with recent trends, but more people chose to view pre-recorded presentations of these meeting, with,

on average, an increase of eight more people watching each meeting online compared to FY 2019. In-person meetings hosted before the pandemic began were, of course, accessible to all people with internet access, but in addition, both meeting locations were accessible to people with disabilities. Further accessibility measures, more important than ever due to the restriction on in-person meetings, included posting all public input opportunity information online and providing it in print upon request; notices were posted online, mailed and emailed to an opt-in database of 15,023 public involvement contacts as well as mailed to city halls and public libraries around the region. Notices were also placed in seven regional newspapers published in English, Spanish and Vietnamese. Information about how to request a translator or special accommodations was included in each ad. Public meetings were also shared on the Meetup app. Notably, unlike in FY 2019, public input opportunities were not advertised on Facebook. Facebook changed the way it classified government organizations, so the Department chose to refrain from all Facebook advertising while it considered possible legal ramifications.

As with public input opportunities, staff involvement in community events and speaking engagements was greatly impeded by restrictions on gatherings. Before the pandemic, staff were able to attend three community events and six speaking opportunities. The pandemic resulted in the immediate cancellation of 12 scheduled community events and three speaking events; staff then provided eight more presentations virtually for a total of 14—10 fewer than in FY 2019. However, these presentations still reached at least 1,500 people, primarily members of the business community and transportation industry in Dallas and Tarrant counties. The purpose of most of these engagements was to provide an update on regional transportation planning, especially regarding high-speed transportation (pre-March) and COVID-19 impacts (post-March). With the pandemic beginning in mid-March just weeks before the spring outreach season, the Department was denied one of its most effective tools for reaching North Texans.

The loss of so many community events also affected the Department's ability to distribute newsletters and reader-friendly reports to the general public. The number of print copies of each distributed by the Department was lower for each of its four regular publications. However, more than 12,000 copies of the Department's annual performance report were still mailed to partners and elected officials. Furthermore, all of the Department's publications reflected a significant increase in digital traffic this year (although this was due at least in part to the method for reporting these numbers in Google Analytics). In addition, nine partners chose to share Transportation Department articles or other content with their online followers or in their own print publications.

Digital Outreach

In the past several years, the Department has intentionally expanded its online presence, especially on social media. This strategy paid off in FY 2020, when staff were prohibited from conducting in-person public involvement for over six months. The Department's digital outreach strategy is comprised of two elements, a website and accounts on three social media platforms. Website visitors and social media followers often set out to accomplish different tasks, which are reflected in the metrics below. FY 2020 metrics show the Department's website functions as a repository of information for the public, especially about plans and projects, whereas social media is the main interface the public uses to provide comments directly to the Department.

The relative ease of providing comments through social media is reflected in the nature of the comments submitted, whereas engagement through the Department website is often more intentional.

For example, out of 275,874 visits¹ to the Department website last year, 13,648 of those visits were to main public involvement webpages. Apart from the Department homepage, the most-visited webpages were for air quality, with its top three webpages accounting for 23 percent of visits and reflecting outreach initiatives undertaken by this program area in concert with public involvement efforts. On average, the Department's website visitors spent two minutes and eighteen seconds on each webpage. On social media, followers seemed to be engaged across a number of topics, especially bicycle/pedestrian and sustainable development. The Department ended the year with 2,668 Facebook followers and 2,260 Twitter followers, with the reach for both several magnitudes greater.

For FY 2020, website and social media numbers were lower in all categories, except for a modest increase in followers on Facebook and Twitter. This is surprising given the public's necessary turn toward digital communication during the pandemic. However, two factors help to explain these unexpected decreases from FY 2019's high levels of engagement. 1) Increased digital engagement throughout the day meant people were less likely to seek out transportation information in their leisure time, especially when information about the pandemic and other major events dominated the popular discourse. 2) Changes at Facebook that reduced the reach of the Department's posts by 51 percent were intentional. Facebook is known to change its algorithm at least once a year, ostensibly to improve its accuracy, but the most recent change seems to have been made to encourage organizations to increase their spending on advertising. Furthermore, the Department made a coincidental decision to suspend its advertising in FY 2020 to explore the legal ramifications of Facebook's decision to change its classification of government agencies.

Public Comments

This year the public submitted 606 comments. Of those comments, 55 percent were submitted through either Facebook or Twitter, and 33 percent were submitted through the Department's new interactive public input tool, Map Your Experience. The other comments were mainly received through the Public Involvement Team's transinfo@nctcog.org email account, which is posted to the website and shared widely through the Department's emails, print material and presentations. The few remaining comments were either oral or written comments submitted at public meetings or mailed. In general, comments received through social media were shorter and less detailed than comments received by email or at public meetings.

The Department received 367 fewer comments compared to FY 2019; however, it must be noted a single Facebook post in FY 2019 resulted in 400 comments, more than accounting for the difference and perhaps indicative of the number of comments we did *not* receive in FY 2020 due to the suspension of Facebook advertising. Relatedly, there was no similarly galvanizing issue or topic in FY 2020. As in the previous year, bicycle/pedestrian and sustainable development initiatives (36 percent) and transit (21 percent) were the most commented upon topics, although comments from the Map Your Experience tool helped to elevate bicycle/pedestrian and sustainable development above other categories; one MYE user submitted one-fifth of these comments.

¹For purposes of this report, visits are "user sessions" recorded in Google Analytics.

Of all the project-specific comments, TEX Rail and IH 345 received the most attention. However, discussions of both projects mainly occurred on Twitter and were driven by a single, well-known user. In the case of TEX Rail, comments were largely positive, whereas comments about IH 345 expressed opposition to the Department's efforts. Other areas of significant public interest, as reflected in the comments, were safety, traffic congestion, air quality, and alternative fuel vehicles. Media interest in high-speed transportation and Panther Island was not reflected in public comments.

Transportation Public Involvement Annual Performance Report: FY2020 Outreach Strategy Performance Metrics

NCTCOG Transportation Department Website				
Total number of visits ¹	/trans		275,874	
	/trans/involve		13,648	4.95% ²
Number of unique visitors ³	/trans		216,355	
	/trans/involve		10,360	4.79%
Webpages with most visits	/trans/quality/air/ozone		29,166	10.57% ⁴
	/trans/quality/air/for-everyone		27,082	9.82% ⁴
	/trans/about/committees/regional-transportation-council		12,553	4.55% ⁴
	/trans/quality/air/for-everyone/aircheck		8,439	3.06% ⁴
	/trans		7,854	2.85% ⁴
Average time spent on significant webpages	/trans		2;18 (minutes)	
	/trans/involve		1:44 (minutes)	
Top referring websites/ sources of web traffic ⁵	Facebook			
	fortworthtexas.gov			
Most common search terms	N/A—Data no longer available through Google Analytics subscription.			
Social Media and Video				
Facebook	Number of total page likes		2,668	
	Total reach		118,927	
	Average engagement rate per post		3.9%	
Twitter	Number of followers		2,260	
	Total number of impressions		389,311	
	Total number of engagements		4,728	
	Average engagement rate per post		1.1%	
YouTube	Number of subscribers		184	
	Number of views		4,367	
	Estimated minutes watched		12,792	
Print and Digital Publications				
Publication Name	Citizen's Guide	Progress North Texas	Mobility Matters	Local Motion
Available publication formats	Print, PDF, HTML	Print, PDF, HTML	Print, PDF, HTML	Print, PDF, HTML
Number of print copies of each publication distributed	60	7,156	6,730	1,800
Number of online unique views for each publication	120	936	352	462

¹ Website visits are “user sessions” recorded in Google Analytics..

² Percentage represents the Public Involvement webpages' share of the Department's total visits.

³ Unique visitors are “users” recorded in Google Analytics.

⁴ Percentages represent the specific webpage's share of the Department's total visits.

⁵ This is determined by the number of “users” as reported in Google Analytics.

Transportation Public Involvement Annual Performance Report: FY2020
Outreach Strategy Performance Metrics

Public Meetings and Community Events		
Public Meetings	Number of public meetings	2
	Number of online public input opportunities	7
	Median attendance per meeting	5 people
	Median online viewers per meeting and online public input opportunity	34 views
	Accessible locations for individuals with disabilities	Yes
	Regional accessibility of information	Yes (online posting, email, notices to libraries and city halls, newspaper ads, mailed postcards)
	Notification of how to request language translation or special accommodations	Yes (online posting, email, notices to libraries and city halls, newspaper ads, mailed postcards)
Public Contacts	Number of contacts receiving public meeting notifications	15,023
	Net change in number of contacts for the year	+0.58%
Public Meeting Advertising	Ad placements	Dallas Morning News, Al Dia, Fort Worth Star-Telegram, La Vida the Black Voice, La Estrella, Star Local, Tre
	Median reach for each Facebook ad	No advertising due to legal considerations
	Median engagement for each Facebook ad	No advertising due to legal considerations
Community Events	Number of events attended by staff	3
	Number of events distributing NCTCOG Transportation Department information	3
	Total estimated attendance for all events	Not available
	Geographic representation in event locations	Dallas, Denton
Public Comments		
Total number of comments received	606	
Number of comments from email	65	
Number of comments from social media	333	
Number of comments from meetings and events	3	
Number of comments received via other modes	1 fax	
Most common comment topics	Bicycle/Pedestrian/Sustainable Development, Transit, Public Involvement, Safety, Traffic Congestion, Air Quality, Alternative Fuel Vehicles, TEX Rail	

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Speaking Opportunities			
Number of presentation requests	18		
Number of presentations	14		
Number of people reached	At least 1,500		
Types of audiences/groups reached	Business and transportation industry primarily		
Types of presentation topics	Regional transportation, COVID-19 impacts, high-speed rail		
Shareable Content			
Number of partners that shared content	9		
Type of partners that shared content	Municipalities, chambers, radio stations, podcasts		
Type of content shared by partners	MPO articles and press releases, maps, social media posts		
New audiences reached through partners	Residents of Irving and Waco		
Media Relations			
Number of news releases	23		
Number of media requests	42 print		
	17 TV		
	3 radio		
Number of media mentions	169		
Media Contacts List	Types of news sources	Newspapers (print, online, local, state, national, daily, weekly, monthly), magazines, TV, radio, podcasts	
	Number of reporters	198	
	Number of news outlets	132 newspapers 10 radio	
	Number of minority news outlets	23 newspapers	
	Number of news outlets in each county	Collin	14
		Dallas	51
		Denton	9
		Ellis	6
		Hood	1
		Hunt	3
		Johnson	2
		Kaufman	5
		Parker	4
		Rockwall	2
Tarrant	19		
Wise	3		
No County	10		