

Wilmington Metropolitan Planning Organization

Public Involvement Policy

I. Introduction

Overview

The Wilmington Urbanized Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's (WMPO's) Public Involvement Policy is an umbrella policy, encompassing the plans and programs of the greater Wilmington Urban Area's transportation planning process. Public participation is an integral part of the WMPO's planning efforts. The Public Involvement Policy is comprised of the public involvement programs for all the major planning activities, including the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Program (MTIP), the Planning Work Program (PWP) and the MPO's provisions for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The WMPO is an intergovernmental transportation planning agency created by an agreement among the City of Wilmington, the Town of Belville, Town of Carolina Beach, Town of Kure Beach, Town of Leland, Town of Navassa, Town of Wrightsville Beach, Brunswick County, New Hanover County, and the North Carolina Board of Transportation. State and Federal laws require the formation of MPOs in urbanized areas with populations of more than 50,000 population in order for surface transportation projects to be eligible for Federal transportation funding.

The WMPO is responsible for conducting a continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive transportation planning process for all of the members within the WMPO urbanized area. The WMPO must plan for the movement of both people and goods within the WMPO boundaries by all modes of travel, including highways, public transportation, bicycles, and foot. It also plans for the connections (such as airports, seaports, buses, railroads, and pipeline terminals) linking these modes and connecting the greater Wilmington area to the rest of the state, country, and world.

Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC)

The TAC is the policy and decision-making body for the WMPO. The TAC is comprised of elected and appointed officials from the City of Wilmington, the Towns of Belville, Carolina Beach, Kure Beach, Leland, Navassa, Wrightsville Beach, Brunswick County, New Hanover County, and the North Carolina Board of Transportation. The TAC is ultimately responsible for providing opportunities for citizen participation in the transportation planning process.

WMPO Voting Members

New Brunswick County: One elected official
New Hanover County: One elected official
City of Wilmington: Two elected officials
Town of Belville: one elected officials
Town of Carolina Beach: one elected officials
Town of Kure Beach: One elected official
Town of Leland: One elected official
Town of Navassa: One elected official
Town of Wrightsville Beach: One elected official
North Carolina Board of Transportation: One official

WMPO Non-Voting Members

Wilmington Airport Authority
North Carolina State Ports Authority
Wilmington New Hanover Transportation Agency
Federal Highway Administration

Non-Members but receive full agenda packets

New Hanover County Schools
North Carolina League of Municipalities
Cape Fear Council of Governments
Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce

The WMPO will seek public input through a menu of techniques, including public notices, comment periods, workshops, charrettes, public hearings, newsletters, surveys, media relations, periodic transportation summits, and the Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC). The techniques employed will vary, depending on the specific planning task. The MPO will hold a forty-five (45) day public comment period for amendments to the Public Involvement Policy and will seek input and feedback on the MPO's public involvement efforts. The WMPO's Public Involvement Policy will be consistent with the requirements of the following:

- Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21);
- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) ;
- Interim FTA/FHWA Guidance on Public Participation.

Transportation Coordination Committee (TCC)

The TCC is made of planners and engineers on staff at each of the member agencies to facilitate coordination of the WMPO's planning activities and transportation planning and related activities occurring within each member agency's jurisdiction. The TCC reviews plans and programs and makes recommendations to the TAC.

Purpose

The purpose of the WMPO 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.

Policy Elements

The WMPO's Public Involvement Policy is comprised of a number of sub-policies. All planning programs and activities are required to go through the Transportation Advisory Committee's (TAC) public process. In addition, the WMPO has initiated specific public involvement programs for the LRTP, the MTIP, the PWP and the WMPO's provisions for American with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Regular Public Involvement Opportunities

The TAC generally holds regular monthly meetings on the fourth Thursday of every month. These meetings are open to members of the public and upon request anyone can be placed on the TAC mailing list. At the beginning of each regular meeting, the TAC will provide time to receive public comments as a set part of its agenda.

Public Involvement for Specific Planning Items

For particular planning issues (i.e. plan development & updates, studies, amendments to planning documents, etc.), the TAC will open a public comment period. The public comment period will be for a minimum thirty (30) days and at the end of the period the TAC will hold a public hearing. The TAC will make the determination as to whether a public hearing is warranted.

Response to Public Comment

The TAC typically acknowledges public comments in one of the following two ways: the TAC may incorporate a summary of public comments and the WMPO'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.

GOALS:

The goals of the WMPO's Public Involvement Policy are:

- A. The WMPO will actively seek and consider public input and incorporate or otherwise respond to the views of its stakeholders in making its decisions.
- B. The public will be informed in a timely manner about and empowered to participate in the WMPO's decision-making processes, which are open, understandable, and consistently followed. Access points for public input will be clearly defined from the earliest stages of a decision process and provide adequate time for stakeholders to participate.
- C. Credible, effective public participation processes will be consistently incorporated into the WMPO's program operations, planning activities, and decision-making processes, at headquarters and in the field. Every employee within the WMPO will share responsibility to promote, practice, and improve public participation.

Objectives

- 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 general public.
- Determine the public's knowledge of the metropolitan transportation system and the public's values and attitudes concerning transportation.
- Educate citizens and elected officials in order to increase general understanding of transportation issues.
- 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 TEA-21, NEPA and the Interim FTA/FHWA Guidance on Public Participation.

II. Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)

Long Range Transportation Plan Public Involvement Procedure

The WMPO will provide an opportunity for meaningful public involvement in the development and update of the Transportation Plan. The public comment period will be for a minimum thirty (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 WMPO. The WMPO's contact person, phone number and e-mail address will be included in the public notice. The WMPO will assemble all comments and forward comments to the Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) and the TAC. The TAC shall hold at least one public hearing for the Long Range Transportation Plan.

Objectives

- Proactive participation techniques may be employed to involve citizens and provide fuller access to information and technical data on the Transportation Plan. The technique may include, but not be limited to, public meetings/hearings, surveys, focus groups, newsletters, public service announcements, charrettes, transportation advisory group, mass media, etc.
- With every update of the LRTP the WMPO will sponsor a Transportation Summit comprised of state and local leaders to discuss local and regional transportation issues.
- Public meetings may be held to formulate a vision for the LRTP development, provide the public background information on the metropolitan transportation system and other issues as well as the proposed framework of the LRTP update process, and to receive citizen input.
- Public meetings (forums) designed to solicit public comment may be held at various locations around the metropolitan area to encourage the greatest public participation.

- Public meetings will be held at a location which is accessible to persons with disabilities and preferably located on a transit route.

Notifications will inform the public of the availability of the draft LRTP 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 48 hours 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 LRTP will be on file for public review at the City of Wilmington Planning and WMPO member offices, and at area libraries. A copy will also be available in a PDF format for downloading on the Wilmington MPO Internet site.

- The public comment period will be for a minimum thirty (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 WMPO. The WMPO's contact person, phone number and e-mail address will be included in the public notice.
- Any significant revisions to the LRTP will also be subject to an additional minimum fourteen (14) day public comment process as described in this policy.
- Involvement of the public at 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.

III. Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Program (MTIP)

The Federally required Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Program, or MTIP, is a comprehensive listing of all the WMPOs transportation projects that receive federal funds. The MTIP sets forth the TAC's priorities, funding and scheduling of transportation improvement projects (highway, bicycle, pedestrian, transit capital and operating assistance, and other transportation improvements in the WMPO) using State and Federal funds. The MTIP serves as the project selection document for transportation projects and, therefore, is the implementation mechanism by which the objectives of the LRTP are reached.

The MTIP and the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) must match exactly in projects, schedule, and scope, for projects to move forward with Federal funding. It is therefore critical that close coordination be held with the State to assure that both parties are in agreement with the program and thus allow projects and programs (including transit elements) to move forward.

The TAC prepares and adopts the MTIP every two years. By law, the MTIP must cover at least a three-year period and contain a priority list of projects grouped by year. Further, the MTIP must be financially constrained by year (meaning that the amount of dollars programmed must not exceed the amount of dollars estimated to be available). Federal regulations also require an opportunity for public comment prior to MTIP approval.

TEA-21 mandates an opportunity for public review of the MTIP. The following is the proposed public involvement procedure for the Wilmington Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Program.

There are three principal opportunities for public participation in the MTIP process. In year one there are two opportunities. First there will be a process to provide public input as the Regional Priority List is being developed. The MTIP Regional Priority List shall be provided to the State for consideration for inclusion in the draft STIP. Secondly at the end of year one a preliminary draft MTIP will be released for an extended period of review. The WMPO shall coordinate with the State as to project changes / additions desired by the WMPO. Mid-way through the second year a final draft MTIP will be released for a formal public review prior to TAC approval and forwarding to the North Carolina Board of Transportation to be included in the STIP which concludes the process.

The minimum public comment period on the final draft MTIP shall be thirty (30) days. Written comments will be received during the comment period and will be directed to the WMPO. The WMPO's contact person, phone number and e-mail address will be included in the public notice. The WMPO will assemble all comments and forward comments to the TCC and the TAC. The TAC shall hold at least one public hearing for the MTIP.

IV. Planning Work Program (PWP)

The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) requires each MPO, as a condition to the receipt of Federal highway and transit capital or operating assistance, is required to conduct a documented comprehensive transportation planning process. A Planning Work Program (PWP), which includes planning and project development activities that address transportation issues in the area, is required by this process. Annual certification that the planning process is being carried on in conformance with stated requirements is necessary for the receipt of funding for surface transportation programs, air quality, national highway system, Interstate maintenance, state bridge replacement, and transit capital and operating funds. The purpose of the PWP is to administer the MPO planning program and carry out the planning activities necessary to implement the Long Range Transportation Plan.. It also serves to document the proposed expenditures of Federal, State and Local transportation planning funds, and provides a management tool for the WMPO and the funding agencies in scheduling major transportation planning activities and projects.

The major elements of the Unified Planning Work Program include:

- Committee Coordination, Administrative Updates, Routine Services, Training
- Short-Range Transit Planning
- Air Quality Monitoring and Planning if required
- Socioeconomic Data
- Model Development
- Traffic Counting
- Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)
- Short-Range Transportation Planning
- Long-Range Transportation Planning
- Data Processing Hardware/Software
- Transportation Plans
- Safety Management
- Rideshare Program
- Commute/Smart Options Program

The PWP must identify the MPO's planning tasks to be undertaken with the use of Federal transportation funds, including highway and transit funds. 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 MPO. The minimum public comment period on the PWP shall be thirty (30) days. Written comments will be received during the comment period and will be directed to the WMPO. The WMPO's contact person, phone number and e-mail address will be included in the public notice. The WMPO will assemble all comments and forward comments to the TAC.

V. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Provisions

All notices for planning activities of the Metropolitan Planning Organization will include an announcement that states that persons with disabilities will be accommodated. Special provisions will be made if notified 48 hours in advance (i.e. having available large print documents, audio material, someone proficient in sign language, a translator or other provisions requested). Public meetings will be held in locations accessible to persons with disabilities and will be located near or on a transit route if possible.