

# Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN 2017-2020 *Executive Summary*

## Background

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) strives to lead transit-oriented public participation, outreach and communication. WMATA's Public Participation Plan (PPP) serves as a guiding tool to guarantee high-quality two-way communication, provide feedback from all those impacted by planned projects and to fulfill federal obligations.

As a recipient of federal funds and per Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, WMATA must submit to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) a Public Participation Plan that details the Authority's plans and strategies to engage minority and Limited English Proficient (LEP) populations in its planning and programming activities. Though this plan was developed to satisfy the Title VI requirement, its framework is designed to be applied to all Authority outreach efforts, whether "required" or not.

## Guiding Principles

WMATA's Public Participation Plan has established guiding principles, goals, and objectives that demonstrate the Authority's philosophy toward, and larger commitment to, public participation, equity, and excellent public service. For projects that trigger the Public Participation Plan, these principles should be followed.

### WMATA's Four Guiding Principles for Public Participation



#### **Inclusive**

Actively facilitate the involvement of all communities that may be affected in the public participation process.



#### **Collaborative**

Work jointly with the community throughout the planning and project development process.



#### **Responsive**

Proactively link public feedback to outcomes in order to build trust.



#### **Consistent**

Ensure established guidelines from the Public Participation Plan are followed throughout WMATA.

## Developing a PPP Project Communications & Outreach Plan

Based on recommendations from the first edition of the PPP and input from stakeholders, WMATA has now adapted a standardized public participation planning process. By following this process, compliance and consistency is ensured for all planned project communications and outreach methods.

WMATA has a wide variety of projects and initiatives that trigger the compliance of the Public Participation Plan. Overall, any planned project that has a customer impact or a project that requires public feedback must follow PPP guidelines.

WMATA's Office of External Relations along with other partner offices work with department project managers and points-of-contact to ensure a streamlined and timely PPP process. This includes collecting critical information about a project, including the scope/timeline, demographic information of the impacted population, budget, and communication and input purpose. Once project information has been shared, the Office of External Relations

works with the Project Manager and others to create a Project Communication & Outreach Plan (PCOP) specifically tailored for that project. Each plan pays special attention to impacts on Title VI communities and verifies that it follows WMATA's Language Access Plan requirements.

Since the implementation of the Public Participation Plan in 2015, WMATA now tracks the implementation of all Project Communications and Outreach Plans through discrete reporting measurements. These performance measures are tracked through WMATA's new PPP online tracking tool called the Public Participation Management System (PPMS), a tool that provides a new way to track PPP projects and creates one large database for FTA monitoring and compliance reporting.

## 2014-2017 Review

WMATA's 2014-2017 Public Participation Plan was developed through a year-long, multi-step process and led by a cross-departmental team with representation from offices and departments that currently engage in public outreach activities.

Since the Public Participation Plan was developed, more than 35 planned projects have followed the PPP process with over 1,000 activities completed, including pop-up events, Community Based Organization visits, surveys, open houses and other engagement strategies.

Key findings found in the original development of the Public Participation Plan still hold true for the 2017-2020 edition. These findings have been used to shape communication and outreach plans and provide a strong base for many of the successes over the past few years.

- 1 To involve Title VI populations, go where they are.** Holding events where minority, low-income, and LEP population are — like transit centers, CBOs, shopping centers, and festivals — is the most effective method for reaching these populations.
- 2 Demonstrate cultural sensitivity.** Know your audience and bring the appropriate WMATA personnel (subject matter, cultural, and linguistic expertise) to events and meetings.
- 3 Make it convenient to attend events and tailor event formats to the preferences of groups whose input is sought.** Meeting formats should be tailored to the preferences of individual groups or communities — this includes in-person and virtual. Considerations should also be made to include children, like providing activities for children allowing parents to attend and participate in the meeting.
- 4 Translate materials and use graphics.** Informational materials should be available in the target population's language of preference and should be culturally appropriately designed by taking into consideration the intended audience and by creating a clear message with the use of graphics and effective use of text.
- 5 Use media in different languages and vary distribution outlets.** Materials should be distributed through various outlets and to locations that many riders frequent, including on the bus, at bus stops, and at Metrorail stations. Materials should also be distributed to locations that are not necessarily transit related, such as Community Based Organizations, libraries, grocery stores, and residences. Newspaper advertising also still works and is a preferred way for many people to receive community information.
- 6 Acknowledge and use input.** It should be explicitly evident how public input will be used in decision making.
- 7 Establish an institutional framework for public participation that includes a lead department.** A department should be specifically tasked with overseeing public participation and/or a process that facilitates the involvement of several departments.

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- 8 **Work with Community Based Organizations to build relationships and trust across diverse populations.** These nonprofit groups support local communities and are among the most effective resources available to a transit agency for facilitating the frequent contact that is needed to build trust and mutually beneficial relationships.
- 9 **Use a variety of tactics to get the word out.** Consider employing other techniques, such as using student report card distribution times to get information to families or door-to-door outreach in targeted areas.
- 10 **Use technology appropriately.** While it has its place in public participation, technology should supplement other forms of outreach.
- 11 **Use a recurring public forum to allow members of the public to provide feedback to WMATA regarding issues of concern to them.** This feedback will supplement existing opportunities to comment on specific projects, proposals, and plans.

## Recommended Strategies & Implementation from the 2014-2017 PPP

Per FTA requirements for the PPP, WMATA identified proactive strategies that engaged minority, low-income, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) communities, created a process and set of procedures that will facilitate inclusive participation; and developed a set of performance measures that track whether the agency is reaching its desired outcomes. The 2014-2017 PPP included four primary strategies that ensured WMATA's public participation activities were effective, efficient, and compliant with federal requirements for inclusive public participation. The PPP also included additional secondary recommendations, many that were addressed through the initiatives of the primary strategies.

WMATA was accountable to the FTA for ensuring that the procedural strategies adopted by the Authority in the PPP were successfully implemented. Below are the four primary recommendations proposed in the 2014-2017 PPP and a brief description on how WMATA fulfilled those recommendations during the reporting period.

### Public Participation Toolkit & Project Communications/Outreach Plan

The PPP recommended that WMATA design a toolkit to help staff plan effective outreach with a Project Communications/Outreach Plan (PCOP) that every WMATA project would use to plan public participation activities. The PPP also recommended WMATA establish a Community Based Organization (CBO) Outreach Committee as a way of collaborating with local CBOs to develop strategies that are tailored to specific project proposals, to ensure meaningful, broad-based public participation, and to build a new avenue for knowledge transfer between WMATA and the CBOs.

The Office of External Relations worked closely with the Web Applications Group within the Department of Information Technology to transfer the toolkit laid out in the 2014-2017 PPP into a web-based, user-friendly project tracking tool. This tool, called the Public Participation Management System (PPMS), has the ability to export on-demand performance measure and activity reports, provides project managers the ability to collaboratively develop a PCOP along with the Office of External Relations, and allows for demographic information and participation metrics input. Based on a review of Peer Agency best practices, this toolkit may be a first of its kind in transit public participation.

The development of WMATA's first Community Based Organization Outreach Committee began in 2015 as an initiative led by the Office of Equal Employment Opportunity (OEEO). The first CBO Outreach Committee planning meeting was held in December 2015. Seven representatives from local CBOs attended and provided insight on how to further cultivate and sustain the committee. Since the first two planning meetings, the CBO Outreach Committee meetings have been used to focus on Metro-related topics. The group has also communicated through email and regularly receive project information and opportunities to provide input.

## 2014-2017 Primary Recommendation

# 1

## 2014-2017 Primary Recommendation

# 2

### Performance Measures

The PPP recommended performance measure data that focused on participant demographics, participant feedback, and participant follow-up be collected for each public participation project along with an annual performance report that aggregate measures from individual projects and the results of an annual survey of CBOs.

The implementation began in mid-2015 with the roll-out of the new Public Participation Management System (PPMS). More than 1,000 activities have been tracked in the PPMS system in 2015 and 2016. Each of these activities include all relevant participation metrics, feedback types, and how impacted Limited English Proficient populations were addressed. Based on the projects that have been tracked in the new PPMS system, WMATA has reached an average score of 98 percent among all of the performance measures tracked.

## 2014-2017 Primary Recommendation

# 3

### Public Participation Training

To ensure the successful, uniform adoption of the Toolkit and an Authority-wide understanding of Title VI requirements for public participation, the PPP recommended that WMATA staff involved in public outreach be required to use the Toolkit and receive training.

Since the PPP was implemented, WMATA has trained over 100 project managers during four scheduled trainings between May 2015 and August 2016. Training binders were provided to all attendees, and the materials, along with an "Introduction to the Public Participation Plan" video, are also available to WMATA employees on Metroweb, WMATA's Intranet.

## 2014-2017 Primary Recommendation

# 4

### Centralized Public Participation Office

In addition to the Toolkit, the PPP recommended that WMATA establish a centralized office to manage public outreach. The Office of External Relations (EREL) was tasked with providing expert assistance to project/planning staff for individual projects, managing all project-based public participation activities, and providing oversight and coordination for public participation within WMATA. The Office of Equal Employment Opportunity (OEEO) was tasked with additional functions related to managing relationships and outreach with Community Based Organizations (CBOs).

WMATA created a Public Participation Programs team within the Office of External Relations which included reallocating one staff member to manage the program and hiring two additional staff members in the spring/summer of 2015. The current structure under the Director of External Relations includes a Manager of Public Participation Programs and two Outreach Specialists/Special Project Officers.

Since the implementation of this team in 2015, they have coordinated more than 1,000 planned projects' communication and outreach activities throughout the agency, working closely with other internal departments to coordinate projects and ensure compliance. Two additional positions, a Translation Coordinator and Project Coordinator, hope to be added to the team but are currently on hold due to budget constraints.

The Office of Equal Employment Opportunity also hired a new staff member to manage relationships with Community Based Organizations and is currently working to revitalize CBO activities.

## Moving Forward: 2017-2020 Recommendations

Over the last few years, WMATA has transformed the way it communicates and collects feedback from the public. With new projects beginning every week and thousands of riders impacted, WMATA continues to try to find more efficient, effective ways to talk to customers, especially those that are in hard-to-reach communities.

As a result of an assessment of lessons learned, a review of best practices of peer agencies, rider and employee feedback, an understanding of Metro's direction and its budget constraints, two new recommendations have been proposed.

### Expand strategies and internal processes for reaching Limited English Proficient (LEP) communities.

WMATA made huge progress with the development of the 2014-2017 Public Participation Plan in reaching LEP communities. For all planned projects, target populations were considered when developing the communication and outreach plans and all had a LEP component. Bilingual outreach teams, translated signs, ads and materials became standard for all PPP activities. However, with the increase in workload, it became clear that new strategies needed to be implemented to manage the outsourcing of translations for multiple projects, quality checking the work, and understanding the trends in communications and media placement for LEP populations. In order to tackle these issues, along with new requirements from the Language Access Plan, WMATA should consider the following strategies:

1. Build stronger relationships and collect feedback from Community Based Organizations (CBOs) specializing in Limited English populations about recommendations for communications and outreach. This includes exploring technology and communications alternatives that may better engage busy CBO representatives and working closing with the CBO Outreach Committee to review strategies for individuals that need language assistance.
2. Establish a Translation Project Coordinator position to provide a central point of oversight for all PPP translations and language requirements.
3. Secure on-call assistance for professional translation and interpretation vendors to be contracted for PPP projects.

### Consider new and innovative ways to collect feedback and communicate about planned projects to hard-to-reach communities, especially those techniques that save resources.

New, inventive communication tools have been developed over the last few years that may prove useful for some target communities. Though it has been proven that in-person outreach is a more effective tactic when reaching Title VI populations, the digital divide is shrinking at even faster rates with cheaper technology and programs to ensure access to the Internet. There may be other ways to "go where they are" through technology.

*Amplify*, WMATA's online community portal, demonstrated an interest for these types of digital engagements. Below are a couple of strategies that WMATA should explore:

1. The use of geo-location technology as an alternative mode to disseminate information and collect feedback from customers in an affected area. Using this technology, whether through surveys or notifications, is essentially going to where people are "virtually" located.
2. Identification of new methods to collect feedback, including emerging trends in online discussion forums, touch-screen kiosks and Twitter pools.

## Conclusion

WMATA's Public Participation Plan is a comprehensive document that includes detailed guidelines for executing inclusive, consistent, collaborative and responsive public outreach. In creating this plan, WMATA set out not only to be compliant with FTA requirements, but also to become a leader in progressive public participation.

## 2017-2020 Recommendation

# 1

## 2017-2020 Recommendation

# 2