

**PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND CONSULTATIVE PROCESS
FOR TRANSPORTATION PLANNING**

**SOUTHEASTERN CONNECTICUT COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS
5 Connecticut Avenue, Norwich, Connecticut 06360**

Prepared in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration, and the Connecticut Department of Transportation.

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**SOUTHEASTERN CONNECTICUT COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS
THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND CONSULTATION PROCESS FOR
TRANSPORTATION PLANNING**

The Public Participation and Consultation Process is one that provides continuing opportunity for citizens and governmental agencies to express their views to be considered as part of transportation planning and decision-making. This activity is necessary in order to ensure that programs and policies developed by elected and appointed officials are responsive to the objectives and values of the citizens affected by them and do not conflict with policies and programs of other governmental agencies. Therefore, public participation and consultation is primarily a process to ensure that government, at all levels, is coordinated and that resources are used effectively and efficiently.

The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SCCOG) is the designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) responsible for transportation planning in southeastern Connecticut. SCCOG and its subsidiary, the Regional Planning Commission (RPC), is committed to the process of informing and seeking the advice of the public it serves in the Southeastern Connecticut Region. Therefore, the Council hereby sets forth its policies and practices through which individuals and groups will have opportunities to participate in the transportation planning process by expressing their concerns, ideas and opinions on the Council's annual transportation planning work program, long-range transportation plan and transportation improvement program. In this document, SCCOG is attempting to cast its Public Participation and Consultation Process in a way that meets, or exceeds, similar requirements in the Connecticut General Statutes and is consistent with the latest federal guidelines set forth in the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU).

Finally, it should be noted that there is a clear demarcation between citizen participation in the transportation planning process and the responsibilities conferred upon elected and appointed officials to fulfill legislated or mandated tasks and obligations. That is, elected and appointed officials may seek public views in a variety of ways and on a variety of matters but the realities of the obligations of those elected or appointed positions means that not all citizen interests can be satisfied in all cases.

1. INFORMATION AVAILABILITY, TRANSPARENCY

The first step in an effective public information/participation process is to make the planning process as transparent as possible. This will be accomplished through the provision of information to be made available to citizens in a variety of different formats.

SCCOG employs a number of proactive techniques to both inform and involve the public in the

planning process.

- a. Quarterly Newsletter: SCCOG publishes its own newsletter to inform the public about matters pertinent to the future of southeastern Connecticut. Typically, articles focus on legislative initiatives, land use and development proposals, highway and transit matters, environmental concerns and studies conducted by staff. The newsletter is widely distributed throughout the region to individuals and organizations contained on a mailing list. Anyone wishing to receive a copy may simply contact the Council's office. A growing and expanding mailing list is then used as the basis for informing those individuals or agencies of meetings, the availability of special studies, job opportunities, etc.
- b. Special Studies: As part of its regular work program, SCCOG staff regularly conducts special studies on a variety of transportation-related topics. These studies are distributed in draft form in order to seek comments from member towns and the public. Comments submitted are then subsequently considered in developing the final reports.
- c. Technical Assistance: In addition to internal SCCOG and RPC committees, SCCOG staff regularly makes itself available to work with outside committees and organizations within the region. This provides many opportunities for staff/public interaction on a variety of different topics. In addition, SCCOG has established special advisory committees on an as-needed basis. These committees are typically technical and therefore draw on outside resources to help support the planning program.
- d. Presentations and Lectures: SCCOG staff makes itself available to a variety of agencies, organizations and citizen groups to discuss subjects of topical concern. This provides an added avenue of public access into the planning process.
- e. Agendas, Minutes, Other Records: As a public agency, SCCOG prepares agendas and minutes for all its public meetings and provides access to all public records as required by the Freedom of Information Act.
- f. Web Site: SCCOG maintains a web site at www.seccog.org. Agendas, meeting minutes, reports, hearing notices, other documents and publications as well as SCCOG news are posted on the web site.
- g. Other Information: The SCCOG office has a multitude of information materials available to the public. Staff maintains an in-house library with both historical and current documents on subjects ranging from housing, land use to transportation and environmental subjects. The Council is a designated Census Data Center affiliate and has available hard copy material from the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census. Census data for 1990 and 2000 is available on CD-ROM. An appointment should be made for reviewing CD-ROM data.

- h. Meetings with Staff: SCCOG has staff available to meet with the public Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. If a member of the public would like to meet for an extended time period, an appointment is preferred. The Council office phone number is: (860) 889-2324. The fax number is: (860) 889-1222. The email address is: office@seccog.org

2. CONSULTATION WITH OTHER AGENCIES

- a. Affiliate/Liaison Members: SCCOG has recognized the vast importance of federally recognized Tribal Nations within the southeast region. This importance reaches well beyond matters related to transportation, including economic development, housing, land use and natural resource planning. The SCCOG bylaws enable representatives of the two federally recognized native American tribes to participate as affiliate non-voting members of the Council of Governments. Likewise, similar standing has also been extended to the United States Naval Submarine Base and the United States Coast Guard Academy, each of which have liaison ex-officio status on the Council.
- b. Other Consultation: For the purposes of transportation planning, in addition to the Connecticut Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration which along with SCCOG, are responsible for transportation planning in the southeastern Connecticut region. SCCOG has created special consultative linkages with the following state and regional agencies having a special or unique stake in transportation planning: Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection; Connecticut Historic Preservation Office of the Connecticut Commission of Culture and Tourism; Connecticut Department of Labor; Connecticut Department of Social Services; Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services; Office of Policy and Management; Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board; Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region; Southeast Area Transit; Thames Valley Council of Community Action; Eastern Connecticut Transportation Consortium; Area Agency on Aging; Route 11 Greenway Authority Commission; Windham Regional Council of Governments; Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments and Connecticut River Estuary Regional Planning Agency.

3. PUBLIC HEARINGS, INFORMATION MEETINGS

The Council of Governments and/or the Regional Planning Commission periodically holds public information meetings and public hearings.

- a. Location: Public information meetings and public hearings will be held at a time and place considered to be convenient to the public so as to optimize public participation. These meetings/hearings are held for the expressed purpose to seek public comments for the identification of transportation and other needs in the region. The actual physical

location and setting within which public participation occurs is an important factor in achieving an effective citizen participation process. The accessibility of the setting is also of special concern both in terms of its location and physical characteristics. Public information meetings may be held prior to the conduct of staff work in order that the public may participate in the process at the earliest possible time. Depending on the size of the anticipated attendance, public hearings will be held at a time and location deemed to be convenient to the public. This may be at the SCCOG office or in one of the region's many other convenient, accessible public buildings. SCCOG will, in all cases, ensure that there are means of appropriate access to assist disabled or elderly persons.

- b. Timing: Timing is a critical issue in terms of balancing public participation and government responsibility for taking action. While the open discussion of issues is of critical importance, the transportation planning process is time-constrained and driven by rigid schedules to which the SCCOG must adhere. Therefore, the citizen participation process must be viewed within the larger context of the activities and responsibilities of SCCOG.

In order to create the greatest amount of opportunity for citizen involvement in all aspects of SCCOG activities, there is a specific time set aside at all regular Council of Governments and Regional Planning Commission meetings for public comment. When necessary, the chairperson (or hearing officer) has the responsibility to set a time limit for individual public comment as well as limiting the overall citizen comment process so as to allow SCCOG and the RPC to conduct its other business.

- c. Content: A formal public hearing will be held by either the Council of Governments or Regional Planning Commission, prior to Council adoption of the following documents: Long Range Regional Transportation Plan, State/regional Transportation Improvement Program (STIP/TIP), Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), and the Air Quality Conformity Statement.

If any of the final documents differ significantly from the one that was made available for public review or new issues were raised which were not foreseeable, an additional opportunity for public comment will be made, if practicable.

- d. Public Comment Period: There will be a 30-day public comment period for each of the above four (4) documents noted above. During this 30-day public comment period, a public hearing will be held. All pertinent documents will be made available at the beginning of the public comment period. Notices for the public comment period will appear on the SCCOG website and be posted in the legal section of a local newspaper with wide circulation.

Administrative amendments to the Regional Transportation Plan or the STIP/TIP that do not impact the region's Air Quality Conformity with the requirements of the Clean Air

Act of 1977, or its subsequent amendments, may be made by SCCOG acting as the MPO as deemed necessary, without following the 30 day public comment period or public hearing process outlined above. Adequate notice to SCCOG members of such proposed amendments shall be made at least five (5) days prior to any meeting at which such action is intended to be taken. In addition, public notice of amendments to any of the above documents will be posted on the SCCOG web site at least 5 days prior to the meeting at which they will be considered.

- e. Notification: Balancing the needs of special interests of individuals and groups is the task of elected and appointed officials. It is the SCCOG policy to seek the opinion of all interested parties who wish to participate in the transportation planning process. As part of the consultative relationship that SCCOG has with the general community, special interest groups or individuals known to the SCCOG will be directly notified of meetings, public hearings, events, availability of reports or other documents of interest.

Notifications of all agency meetings, both regular and special, will conform to the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act (See Section 1-21, Connecticut General Statutes).

Notices of public hearings shall be made through legal notices in at least one (1) newspaper with distribution throughout the southeastern Connecticut region. Legal notices will contain date, time, and location of the hearing as well as the subject. Legal notices will also specify where written material may be obtained prior to the hearing. Public hearing notices will appear once in the paper no less than five (5) days prior to the hearing. Public hearing notices shall also be posted on the SCCOG web site no less than five (5) days prior to the hearing.

- f. Visualization: Where and when appropriate, at any SCCOG or RPC meeting where the Long Range Regional Transportation Plan or STIP/TIP are being discussed, visualization techniques, such as Power Point presentations, maps or charts will be employed to assist the public in understanding and interpreting data and information.
- g. Responses: When significant comments are received by SCCOG as part of the formal transportation planning hearing process, every effort will be made to respond to those submitting comments demonstrating how and in what way comments were addressed.

4. REVISIONS TO PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND CONSULTATION PROCESS

A 45-day comment period will be required when revisions are proposed to the Public Involvement and Consultation Process commencing with publication of a legal notice. The policies in this document will be reviewed annually and revised as needed by SCCOG.

5. CONNDOT PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND CONSULTATION PROCESS

By agreement between the SCCOG and CONNDOT, the public involvement and consultation process adopted by the SCCOG for development of the STIP/TIP will satisfy and act as the State's public involvement and consultation process, as allowed under Section 450.212(b) of the Federal Planning Regulations. Also, CONNDOT, acting as the FTA Section 5307(c) applicant, has consulted with SCCOG and concurs that the public involvement and consultation process adopted by SCCOG, acting as the MPO for the development of the STIP/TIP, satisfies the public hearing requirements that pertain to the development of the Program of Projects for regular Section 5307, Urbanized Area Formula Program grant applications including the provision for public notice and the time established for public review and comment. However, for FTA projects that are not routine, i.e. Section 5307 applications that require an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement, the public involvement provided for herein for STIP/TIP review is not sufficient. Additional public involvement, as presented in the joint FHWA/FTA environmental regulations, 23 C.F.R. part 771, will be required by FTA for grant approval.