



Evaluation of Public Participation Efforts

February 2021

Overview

The RVTPO's Public Participation Plan discusses in section 2.4 how the RVTPO may evaluate public participation.

This report documents RVTPO public participation efforts between July 2019 and December 2020 and records the effectiveness of each tool used for quantity, quality, and diversity of public input to guide future public participation activities.

Surveys

Before the most recent update of the Public Participation Plan, surveys were used for only the largest planning efforts such as the Long-Range Transportation Plan or the Congestion Management Process. For other activities such as the Transportation Improvement Program or amendments to the Long-Range Transportation Plan, the document was provided and an opportunity for comment was posted on the website, in newspaper ads, and in the RVARC e-newsletter. Typical responses to the opportunity for public comment ranged from zero to two comments.

With online survey tools and social media, surveys have become much less resource-intensive to administer. Surveys have been an excellent tool for increasing participation in public comment opportunities. Surveys not only give people an easy way to respond (by providing answer options) but also encourage people to comment within the survey, resulting in more comments than would be received otherwise. The results of multiple-choice surveys as well as the individual comments can be used by decision-makers.

Staff administered ten surveys for the RVTPO between July 2019 and December 2020 (Figure 1). Each survey provided valuable lessons on crafting and promoting surveys. Even the survey that received the fewest responses (Surface Transportation Block Grant Round 4 with 18 responses) outperformed previous public comment periods that did not offer a survey. Survey responses steadily rose as staff learned which strategies were the most successful.

Factors that affected how successful a survey was include which survey tool was used, the topic of the survey, language and terminology, soliciting feedback on the survey itself, and maps.

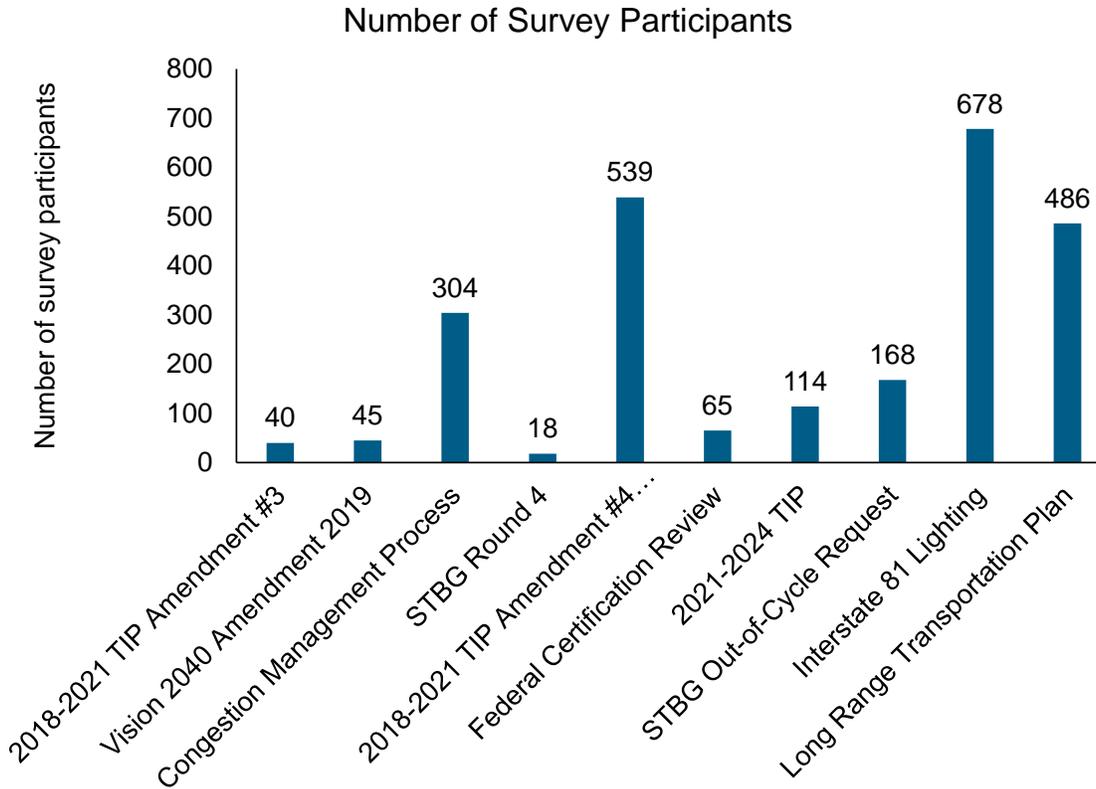


Figure 1. Survey responses

Survey Tool

Survey Monkey was used to develop most surveys. It is easy to use for basic question types such as multiple choice or checkboxes and links or images such as maps can be added to surveys. With Survey Monkey, many collector links can be created so that each strategy to promote the survey can have a unique collector, allowing analysis of the success of each strategy. Survey Monkey surveys can easily be converted to a paper format.

MetroQuest was used for two surveys: The Congestion Management Process and the Long-Range Transportation Plan 2045. The MetroQuest philosophy is that public input should be fun. Coupled with promotional activities, well-designed MetroQuest surveys elicit high numbers of responses. Participants can drag and drop items as well as answer questions and make selections. MetroQuest surveys can have an interactive map, allowing participants to drag and drop points on a map.

RVTPO has access to MetroQuest surveys through the Virginia Department of Transportation subscription.

Survey topic

The topic of a survey is a major factor in how many responses the survey receives. Interstate 81 and traffic congestion are popular topics while the participants struggled to understand the Federal Certification Review. Surveys with popular topics were picked up by TV stations and received higher numbers of responses compared to other surveys. To achieve the same number of responses, surveys about other topics required more resources.

Many required public comment periods are formalities to accept funding decisions that have already been made through various funding programs. It is difficult to explain these funding programs and justify why citizens should take the time to try to understand.

Use language and terminology that is easily understood

Programs and plans often cover projects developed by localities and agencies and the information is provided to staff in a format intended for internal use that is difficult for the public to understand. Terminology is inconsistent depending on which agency or which individual wrote it and the same word may be used to mean different things. Staff learned that information is needed from agencies well in advance of public comment periods so that there is time to develop project titles and descriptions that can be readily understood by the public. When amendments are requested with a short time frame to adopt, there is not time to develop accessible language and terminology which hinders meaningful public input.

Solicit feedback on the survey itself

Including a question about the survey itself elicited valuable feedback and confirmed opinions about collecting public input that were not previously supported by evidence. Having this feedback gave staff the confidence to make changes, for example revising project titles and descriptions provided by other agencies to something more easily understood by the public.

Provide maps

Referring to a route by name rather than number improves understanding, but maps are an essential tool. However, it takes time to develop maps and present them in a format that can be easily viewed in the survey tool and understood. A map image and a link to an interactive map with detailed information can be included in Survey Monkey while MetroQuest accommodates an interactive but simple map directly within the survey.

Survey promotion strategies

Surveys were promoted through the RVTPO blog on the RVARC website, social media, email, in-person, newspaper ads, partners, and media coverage. Where practical, unique survey collector links were used for different strategies so that the effectiveness of each strategy could be assessed (Table 1).

Table 1. Strategies to promote surveys

Survey (No. Responses)	Promotion strategies
2018-2021 TIP Amendment #3 (40)	Blog Email In-person
LRTP Amendment 2019 (45)	Blog Email In-person
Congestion Management Process (304)	Blog Social media Email In-person
Surface Transportation Block Grant Round 4 (18)	Blog Social media Email
2018-2021 TIP Amendment #4 and LRTP Amendment 2020 (539)	Blog Email In-person Media coverage
Federal Certification Review (65)	Blog Social media Email
2021-2024 TIP (114)	Blog Social media Email
Surface Transportation Block Grant Out-of-Cycle Request (168)	Blog Social media Email
Interstate 81 Lighting (678)	Blog Social media Email Media coverage
Long Range Transportation Plan (486)	Blog Social media Email In-person

Blog

A blog post on the web with the survey link yields very few responses. However, it is important to have a consistent place to find information and survey links.

Staff recorded number of unique visits, number of visits, bounce rate, and average visit duration every month. The information was not useful in assessing public outreach efforts and the practice was discontinued after two years.

Social media

Posting survey links on the RVARC Facebook page generated some responses. The post generated some discussion which could be shared with decision makers.

One of the most successful tools to promote surveys was Facebook ads. Facebook ads were targeted to zip codes within the RVTPO area. Using unique collector links, the success of a specific ad can easily be assessed. Comments directly on the ads were shared with decision makers.

Google ads were purchased for two surveys. Google ads resulted in few responses and were not used for further surveys. YouTube and Google ads are better suited for brand awareness ads while Facebook is better suited for calls to action such as taking a survey.

Email

Survey links were included in the RVARC e-newsletter if the e-newsletter was sent within the survey period. Otherwise, survey links were sent as a separate eblast to the same distribution list. A standard optional survey field is email address and staff created an email list. Using a unique collector for the email list, staff determined that the response rate was as high as 25%.

In-person

Opportunities for in-person surveys had mixed results: paper surveys handed out to parents at a swim meet (a captive audience) and at Interstate-81 rest areas performed well while pop-up booths at locations that might draw participants did not yield many responses. Opportunities for in-person were more limited during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Newspaper ads

Using a separate collector for newspaper ads, staff determined that newspaper ads yielded no survey responses. Newspaper ads are required by Virginia state law for certain public comment periods and public hearings.

Partners

Media picked up surveys, and using press releases could generate more media attention on some surveys.

Local governments are valuable partners who are motivated to ensure that their citizens are well represented in surveys. Local governments and other agencies shared survey opportunities in social media and in e-newsletters.

Local governments, the Virginia Department of Transportation, and Valley Metro participated in the Transportation Equity Chats which promoted the RVTPO long-range transportation plan survey. The Chats covered opportunities for public input on transportation at the local government and agency level.

Several partners distributed 1000 postcards that had the survey link and a QR code to their clients or constituents, including RADAR, Botetourt Van Service, Downtown Roanoke Inc., Virginia Career Works, and Roanoke Housing Authority. Postcards were handed out with the Guide to Getting Around Roanoke Valley brochure.

Media Coverage

Television channels picked up stories on surveys related to I-81 and U.S. 460, which were the best performing surveys.

Title VI Evaluation

In 2019, the Roanoke Valley Transportation Planning Organization accepted the Title VI Implementation Plan adopted by the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and related nondiscrimination authorities. The RVTPO collects and monitors the demographics of its survey participants. Demographic information varied among surveys, but included zip code, race/ethnicity, gender, age, and income. The percent of responses from each demographic category was compared to the proportion of the population based on census data. If the survey received more than 384 responses, which is considered the minimum ideal response rate for a population of greater than 100,000, then the percent of 384 was used rather than the percent of total responses to compare to the proportion of the population. African American were consistently underrepresented in survey responses relative to the population. Therefore, efforts were made to increase the number of responses from people identifying as African American.

Strategies to increase responses from under-responding demographics were Facebook ads, email, in-person, and a virtual event.

Facebook ads

Facebook ads can be targeted to specific zip codes. Throughout the survey period, staff monitored the number of responses from each zip code at regular intervals (i.e., weekly). If the percentage of responses from a zip code was less than the proportion of the population from that zip code to the total population of the region, additional Facebook ads were purchased for that zip code. This method achieved at least one response from every zip code in the RVTPO area and the proportion of responses from each zip code within 5% of that zip code’s proportion of the population.

Facebook ads can be targeted to people who have social media characteristics typical of a particular race/ethnicity. Facebook ads targeted to African American characteristics did not improve the number of responses from people identifying as African American.

Email

Staff asked individuals who identify as African American for permission to add them to the email list. This resulted in an immediate increase in the number of responses from people identifying as African American.

In-person

Staff visited locations or events where African Americans were likely to be, such as Melrose Library, Melrose Towers, and the Melrose Fall Festival. Because the surveys were not available in a paper format, staff brought an iPad so that participants who didn’t have a smart phone could access the survey. Survey incentives (\$5 gift cards) increased interest in taking the survey. The Melrose Fall Festival was the most effective location for this approach.

Virtual event

Staff held a series of Transportation Equity Chats intended to raise interest in the long-range transportation plan survey among people who are interested in transportation equity, which may include people who identify as African American. These Chats were livestreamed on Facebook and advertised through Facebook. In the first Chat, local historian Jordan Bell described historic transportation inequity in the region through urban renewal. In the remaining four Chats, staff from RVTPO localities, the Virginia Department of Transportation, and Valley Metro described opportunities for public input. One video reached over 2,000 people (Table 2).

Table 2. Facebook metrics of Transportation Equity Chat videos as of 12/11/2020

Transportation Equity Chat	People Reached	Engagements
History of Urban Renewal	878	19
City of Roanoke	3,122	52
Roanoke County, Vinton	2,164	121
Salem, Botetourt	1,852	106

Transportation Equity Chat People Reached Engagements

Valley Metro, VDOT	177	32
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Local transportation advocate Antwyne Calloway interviewed the guests. Guests appreciated the opportunity to showcase their agency’s public input opportunities and describe how public input has shaped their efforts. Viewers learned that agencies work together on transportation projects, how long it takes to get a project built, and factors that influence transportation decisions.

Survey Creation

Surveys were created using Survey Monkey and MetroQuest. Staff adjusted the design of each survey based on input received from previous surveys.

Survey tools

Survey Monkey was used for most surveys. It is easy to set up and manage surveys. Survey options include multiple choice, checkboxes, textboxes, and ranking. Because it is very popular, survey respondents are familiar with the look and navigation of it.

MetroQuest was used for two surveys, the Congestion Management Process and the Long-Range Transportation Plan. At the time, MetroQuest was available through a VDOT subscription, but RVARC staff did not have direct access to the platform. VDOT staff were extremely accommodating but nonetheless this was challenging to set up for both VDOT and RVARC staff, and RVARC staff did not have access to the data throughout the survey period. MetroQuest is visually appealing and has interactive survey options such as priority ranking, budget allocation, and map markers. VDOT’s subscription now allows RVARC staff direct access to the platform which makes MetroQuest a more feasible option.

Survey design

Survey respondents provided feedback that the language in surveys should be easy to understand. RVARC staff translated information that was written for legislative, regulatory, engineering, and internal purposes into information that the public could easily understand. A review before the survey went live by citizens who are not familiar with the RVTPO helped achieve public-friendly language.

Some surveys offered a 5-point Likert scale of responses (i.e., “Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly agree). Fewer options (i.e., “Yes”, “No”, “Not sure”) were easier to understand and easier to analyze.

Ranking tasks in Survey Monkey are inconsistently understood, even if the instructions specify that “1” is the highest rank some survey takers select greater numbers to indicate higher rank.

MetroQuest's Priority Ranking screen has users drag priorities over the line with the most important at the top, which is more intuitive and more consistently understood. RVARC staff avoided using ranking tasks in Survey Monkey.

Survey respondents more often provide demographic information when it appears at the end of the survey. MetroQuest surveys auto-save data until the demographic questions, which requires a final "submit" button before saving the data. Therefore, over 80% of respondents provided demographic information in Survey Monkey surveys but only 50-60% provided demographic information in MetroQuest surveys.

Most surveys ended with an open-ended comment opportunity, sometimes with the prompt, "Tell us about other projects". This information was saved for the transportation needs assessment, but it was often difficult to determine the need from the project suggested. A more useful prompt would have been, "Tell us about other transportation problems".