

Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments
Route 161 Corridor Study, East Lyme, CT
Job Number: 044-0159
March 2022

Public Engagement Plan



B E T A

1010 Wethersfield Avenue
Suite 305
Hartford, Connecticut 06114
860.513.1503
www.BETA-Inc.com

Route 161 Corridor Study, East Lyme, CT
Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments
Job Number: 044-0159

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Prepared by: BETA GROUP, INC.
Prepared for: Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments

March 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Overview	1
1.2 Guiding Principals	1
1.3 Identification of Stakeholders and Public Groups	2
2.0 Public outreach events and engagement tools	2
2.1 Live Meetings	2
2.1.1 Project Advisory Committee (PAC) Meetings	3
2.1.2 Public Meetings or Workshops	3
2.1.3 Stakeholder Outreach	4
2.2 Electronic Media	4
2.2.1 Project Website	4
2.2.2 Stakeholder Survey – Interactive Map Tool	5
2.2.3 Virtual Meeting Room	5
2.3 Information Distribution Techniques	5
2.3.1 Press Advisories	5
2.4 Responding to public comments	6
2.4.1 Comment Database	6
2.4.2 Response to Comments	6
3.0 Schedule	6

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 - Schedule

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW

This Public Engagement Plan (PEP) describes the objectives, methods, schedule and expectations for public engagement on the Route 161 Corridor Study Project. The purpose of this public involvement effort is to lay the framework to consult and collaborate with diverse project stakeholders and the public to:

- identify traffic, transit, and bicycle and pedestrian mobility deficiencies and needs within the project corridor;
- identify, develop and evaluate alternative solutions to improve safety for all users;
- reach consensus for improvements in the corridor and select the preferred alternative; and
- develop a conceptual design for the chosen plan.

This consultation and collaboration will require significant public and stakeholder input throughout the planning process. Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SCCOG) has selected BETA Group, Inc. to manage this process and coordinate public outreach activities.

A robust public and stakeholder outreach program, guided by this PEP, will utilize a wide range of strategies and techniques to engage residents, businesses, commuters, and other stakeholders throughout the approximately 3.7-mile-long study area running from the driveway of East Lyme High School to Route 161's southern terminus at the intersection of Route 156. Public input will be crucial in ensuring that the project not only addresses Route 161's deficiencies and needs in a practical and cost-effective manner but also considers local and regional context and community concerns, goals and priorities related to land use, intermodal or multimodal travel, environmental protection, economic development, community cohesion and connectivity and social equity.

This PEP describes how the project team will reach out to inform and seek input from stakeholders, the traveling public, and affected communities throughout the project via public meetings, Project Advisory Committee (PAC) meetings, a virtual meeting room, a project website and other forms of outreach, as appropriate. Some methods will be used to let people know where we are in the study process, and others will provide opportunities for discussion and comment. Public opinion and comments will be well-documented and considered throughout project study.

1.2 GUIDING PRINCIPALS

The goals of the public engagement effort for the Route 161 Corridor Study Project reflect CTDOT's overarching goals to be accessible, inclusive, collaborative, responsive, informative, timely and transparent to the public in the provision of transportation services and in the planning and prioritization of major transportation projects.

Specifically, the goals of public engagement for this project are to:

- Obtain input from the public and project stakeholders on study area issues and concerns to help identify and frame the study goals and objectives
- Advise the public on the study findings
- Involve stakeholders and the public in the development and refinement of recommendations that fit the character and future vision of the surrounding community
- Facilitate reviews by the Town Board of Selectmen, Boards, and Commissions as well as Businesses and Residents leading to a Final Corridor Plan that is endorsed by these stakeholders to help guide future transportation system improvements and enhancements

Guiding principles of the public engagement approach for the Route 161 Corridor Study include:

- Information about the study will be readily accessible to the public: A record of all PAC and community meetings will be kept. Technical documents will be placed in locations available to the public.
- Project information will be presented to the public in a clear and accessible manner: Information will be clearly written and all technical terms and procedures will be explained.
- The public may learn about or become engaged in the study in a variety of ways: Methods to inform and engage the public will include Advisory Committee meetings, public meetings, a project website, virtual meeting room, interactive mapping, and traditional media (press releases).
- The study team will be responsive to public engagement: The public and PAC will receive sufficient notice of meetings, which will be scheduled at a time and place that is convenient and comfortable. Ample time to review any materials will also be provided. Public questions and inquiries will be answered in a timely manner.
- The public shall be able to participate in a process that is well coordinated: Good coordination, communication, and collaboration among all concerned agencies and community organizations will be critical to providing the public with the most current and correct information as well as to the overall success of the project.

1.3 IDENTIFICATION OF STAKEHOLDERS AND PUBLIC GROUPS

BETA will work with SCCOG and the PAC to identify stakeholders that should be directly engaged during the study process. For purposes of this plan, a stakeholder is defined as a person or group involved in or affected by this corridor plan, an entity that has the potential to influence people's opinions or decisions relative to transportation investments, or members of the public that have expressed interest in the project.

Examples of stakeholders include federal, state, regional and local officials, CTDOT partners or sister agencies, business, commerce or economic development organizations, transit operators, freight companies, shippers, transportation, transit or commuter advocates, bicycle advocacy groups, environmental organizations, public interest groups, residents and abutting property owners, institutions of higher learning, and community-based groups or social service agencies that advocate for limited English proficient populations, the disability community, and minorities, immigrant and ethnic groups. Some stakeholders already identified for this project are noted in the sections below.

2.0 PUBLIC OUTREACH EVENTS AND ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

The Public Engagement Plan has many elements to involve and inform the public in meaningful ways. The BETA Team will be accessible to the public, share information in a complete and understandable manner, and record and respond to public comments and concerns. Following is a description of each technique along with information about how they will be used and the desired outcomes. These techniques are generally grouped into four categories: 1) Live Meetings; 2) Electronic Media; 3) Information Distribution Techniques; and, 4) Responding to public comments. These are discussed in the following sections:

2.1 LIVE MEETINGS

Live virtual and in-person meetings are an important way to engage with citizens and offer opportunities to communicate and receive input. Every effort will be made to host in-person meetings in locations near public transportation options. All in-person public engagement activities will be held at venues that are

ADA accessible. Once the project team has determined the date, time, and location of the public meeting, the event will be added to Route 161 Corridor Study Project website.

2.1.1 PROJECT ADVISORY COMMITTEE (PAC) MEETINGS

The Project Advisory Committee will serve as the project's technical sounding board and will include representatives from SCCOG, CTDOT, the Town of East Lyme Department of Public Works and Planning Department, and CTDOT, at a minimum. BETA will take a collaborative approach with the PAC, consulting the group early on regarding meeting plans and topics, and sharing relevant technical information and study products with the PAC as they are developed. PAC members will assist in the study effort by providing advice and insight on local issues, identifying challenges/opportunities in the project area, and assessing improvement alternatives. PAC members will be asked to bring concerns and insights for discussion, and to assist the project team in conducting community outreach by identifying issues important to their interests and the public at large, identifying additional key stakeholders, and attending public meetings to discuss the project's progress. It is anticipated that the Advisory Committee will include representatives from SCCOG, CTDOT technical staff, Town of East Lyme Department of Public Works, Town of East Lyme Planning Department, Town of East Lyme Public Schools, Town of East Lyme Police Department, Southeast Area Transit District, and Estuary Transit District. Advisory Committee meetings will be open to the public.

BETA will conduct up to twelve (12) virtual Advisory Committee meetings. It is expected that virtual Advisory Committee meetings will be held at least once every two months. More frequent meetings may be necessary at different phases of the project. CTDOT technical staff will be invited to participate in Advisory Committee meetings. BETA will post meeting agendas and other materials, as necessary, to the project website in advance of meetings to allow adequate time for review. BETA will also post meeting minutes to the project website.

2.1.2 PUBLIC MEETINGS OR WORKSHOPS

BETA will coordinate with SCCOG to conduct two (2) public workshops held during the course of the project, one during Task: 2 Existing Conditions Report and another during Task 3: Alternatives Development. The first meeting will be to present the project and its purpose and need to the public along with the findings of the existing and future conditions report. This meeting will be structured as a listening session to hear about stakeholder issues and concerns and will be a key opportunity for the public to obtain information about the study and provide their input early in the process. The second public meeting will be held later in the project development to engage the public for feedback on the alternatives under review.

The Public Meetings will be held in a hybrid open-house format with a blend of live presentations, informal Q&A sessions, and unstructured, exhibit areas where attendees can roam and view exhibits at their own pace and ask questions of meeting facilitators in a one-on-one chat. The live presentation, or a dry run, will be recorded and posted to the website. The desired outcome of this informal and open house style format is that interested citizens, stakeholders and the media can learn more about the project in a casual and comfortable environment and feel free to ask candid questions, express concerns or comments, and offer ideas. For each public meeting BETA will prepare graphically rich display materials that are written in clear language and easy for the public to understand. Display materials may include maps, timelines, and visualization tools where feasible within the project budget. Each meeting will also include a formal public comment period, and a formal transcript will be taken to document comments received and responses made in support of future potential NEPA/CEPA requirements. The formal comment period will permit both in-person and written comments.

BETA will work with SCCOG to identify and secure meeting venues and publicize upcoming meetings. BETA will prepare press releases and flyers before each of the public meetings to help garner broad participation. BETA asks that SCCOG provide the appropriate media outlets for delivery of the press releases. BETA will consult the Advisory Committee to identify appropriate and effective locations to post flyers for the greatest visibility. Locations may include town buildings, rest areas, and public gathering places such as libraries. Flyers will also be made available in electronic format as a PDF for distribution to email mailing lists including the Advisory Committee and other stakeholder lists and as a JPG for distribution via social media. The Advisory Committee will be asked to distribute flyers to their constituents to spread the word about the meeting and post to their social media pages.

The PAC may also choose to hold a public meeting to present the final draft corridor study. BETA will support this meeting as budget allows.

2.1.3 STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH

There are a number of specific groups of stakeholders that have been involved in past planning efforts in and around the project corridor, and the project teams intends to maintain contact with these groups throughout the course of the study. While this coordination may be done through one-on-one phone calls, online public feedback portals or participation at the public workshops, additional efforts such as direct mailings may be required to ensure these stakeholders are informed of the process. BETA will consult the Advisory Committee to identify major businesses that have the most significant traffic impacts on the corridor. It is anticipated that direct mailers will be sent to up to a dozen such large businesses.

Stakeholders/interests that will be targeted for coordination may include, but are not limited to:

- Town of East Lyme
- SCCOG
- Transit agencies – SEAT and Estuary Transit District
- Niantic Main Street
- Niantic Bay Bicycles
- Area businesses - Costco, Stop and Shop, USPS, business organization in Niantic
- Waterford stakeholders including emergency managers and first responders
- Title VI and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) contacts

2.2 ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Electronic media will be employed as a cost-effective means of casting a broad net and facilitating meaningful participation of stakeholders representing diverse ages, ethnic and racial backgrounds, income levels, and other characteristics.

2.2.1 PROJECT WEBSITE

BETA will provide a domain, host, and develop the project website to provide information about the project and to host project documents. The project website will be the primary portal between the public, interested parties, the Advisory Committee, and the progress of the Corridor Study.

The site will include PowerPoint presentations, technical memoranda, concept plans, maps and other information developed over the course of the project. The website will also be a repository for all information presented at PAC and public meetings as well as summaries of those meetings. The website will also include an interactive link to a virtual public meeting room where stakeholders who are unable to attend in person public meetings may review reports, plans, and agendas, and conduct a virtual site walk of the corridor that will include photos of each intersection.

The website will include the following:

- Home Page: Provide project overview and directory for the other content
- About: Introduce visitors to the project, goals and objectives, study process, timeline, FAQ (to be developed from the public comment submissions) and details about the project team.
- Get Involved: Information about the Public Engagement Plan, the Advisory Committee, summaries of past meetings and information about upcoming events, and a join our mailing list submission form.
- Project materials: Downloadable electronic files of past meeting materials, press releases, and other project documents (plans, reports, technical memos, etc.)
- Contact us: an electronic comment form for the public to submit questions and share views with the project team. A log of all comments will be kept and routinely reviewed by the project team. Questions or comments will be aggregated by general topic, and the project team will provide responses for each general topic or thread to be posted in a FAQ section.

The project website will be updated monthly with news or postings of project progress, reports, meeting announcements, etc.

Project website materials, except for the virtual public meeting room, will be digitally transferred to SCCOG at the project's conclusion.

2.2.2 STAKEHOLDER SURVEY – INTERACTIVE MAP TOOL

The interactive mapping tool, a component of the project website, will allow individuals to share comments or ideas directly on a map they can access from their mobile phones, tablets, or computers. This feature will allow the public to provide valuable input without requiring them to attend a public informational meeting or hearing. BETA will use the input from the map to determine local priorities and concerns.

2.2.3 VIRTUAL MEETING ROOM

To reach people that may not be able to attend live public meetings, BETA will develop a virtual public meeting room that will seek to replicate the information presented and opportunities for comments during the live session. Visitors to the virtual meeting room will be able to view a recording of the presentation, download the slide deck and any meeting handouts, view and comment on project display boards at each of the virtual "stations." BETA will develop a virtual meeting room in advance of each of the two public meetings, and that room will remain live for up to one month after live scheduled public meeting. All digital files removed from the public meeting room will be made available under the Project Materials section of the project webpage.

2.3 INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION TECHNIQUES

The primary purpose of the following tools is to distribute information to the public in a timely and efficient manner. These techniques will also prompt interested citizens and groups to provide contact information (emails) so that they can receive regular updates about the project and to solicit comments from individuals and groups that may not be able to attend live meetings or other public outreach events.

2.3.1 PRESS ADVISORIES

Engagement with the press and media outlets will occur in advance of each public meeting, and to announce the 30-day public review and comment period for the draft final Corridor Study. Press Advisories or Press Releases will update the public on project progress and notify the public and stakeholders about the availability of information or plans. Notices will also be prepared and distributed

to media outlets in advance of key public information meetings about the project to notify the public about the date, time, place of the meetings, the subject to be discussed, study website address, and contact information.

2.4 RESPONDING TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

2.4.1 COMMENT DATABASE

All comments submitted by the public via the website, email, or from the public meetings will be reported to the project team. The project team will create a database to collect, manage and report on questions and comments. Questions and comments will be aggregated by topic or theme, and regularly reviewed with the advisory committee. The comment database will be provided to the SCCOG at the project's conclusion.

2.4.2 RESPONSE TO COMMENTS

The project team will regularly address submitted questions by adding content, as appropriate, to the FAQ page on the project website.

Responses to all non-question comments will be aggregated in the comment database. People who leave comments via the website will automatically be added to the project database and will receive future communications about the project. Oral comments received at public meetings will be captured by project note-takers and put into a meeting summary. These comments will be reviewed, aggregated and archived similarly to those received via the website.

The project team will consider all public comments, both written and verbal, in the decision-making processes of the Route 161 Corridor Study Project. The project team and PAC will review public comments to determine if a response is required, and/or how to address the comment in the design of project alternatives.

3.0 SCHEDULE

The project team has developed a preliminary schedule for public involvement activities to:

- a) elicit timely and productive community dialog about transportation;
- b) to maintain public interest in the project;
- c) to strategically bridge between the plan's technical process and the needs and expectations of the interested public; and,
- d) to maximize benefits that can be achieved from interaction with the public. This schedule will be made available to the public on the project website and will be updated as required during the project.

