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CHAPTER

How Do We Engage the Public?

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the TPB engaged thousands of the region's residents for the Visualize 2045 update. Through the Voices of the Region outreach, which included a survey, focus groups, and poster campaign, the region's residents had a variety of opportunities to offer their concerns for today and aspirations for tomorrow. See the [Voices of the Region Story Map](#) to learn more. The TPB also conducted two comment periods and other opportunities to participate in the region's planning process. Full reports from the outreach activities are available on the [plan's website](#).

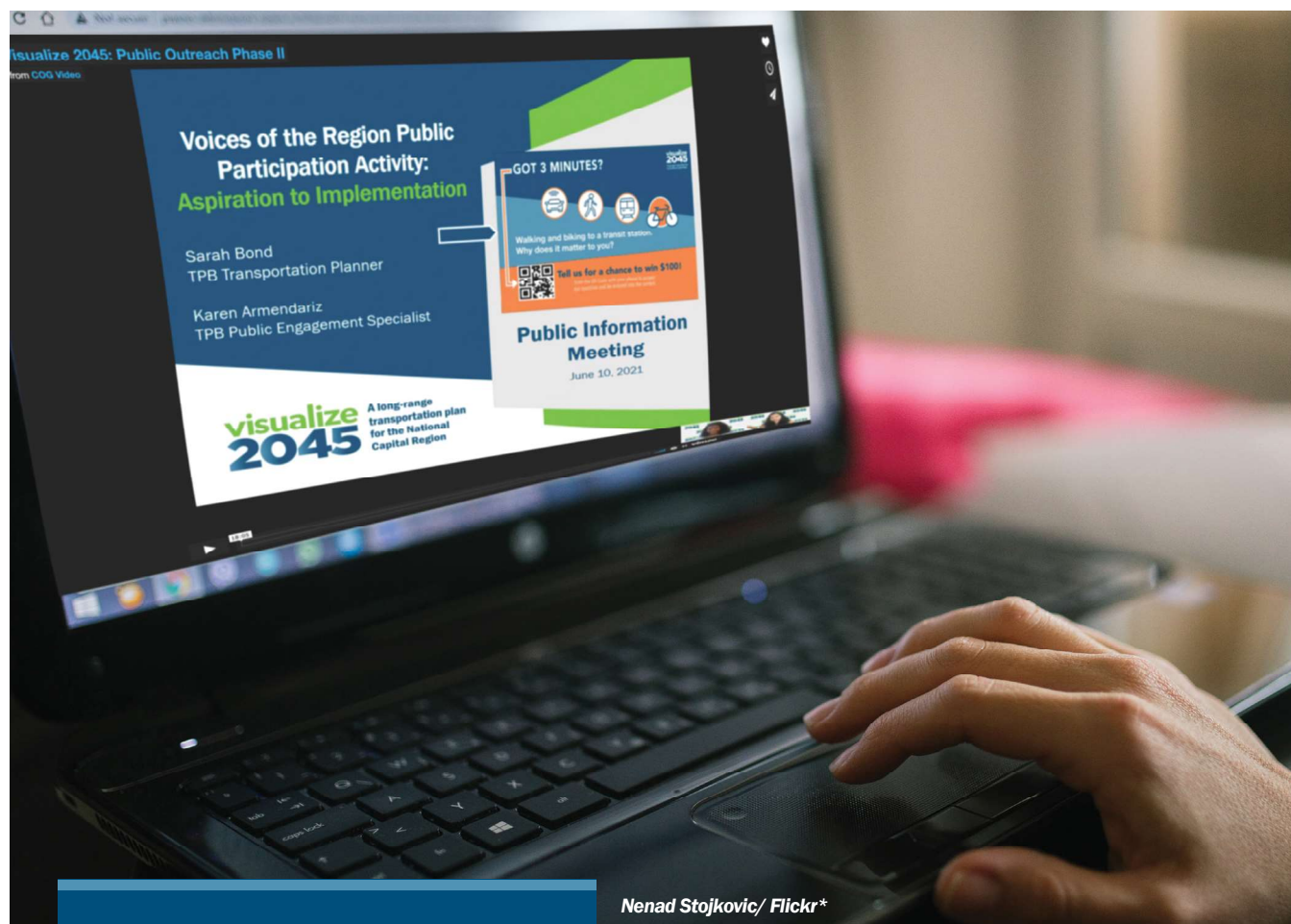
Why Engage the Public?

Federal law and regulations require all MPOs in the U.S. (such as the TPB) to conduct public participation activities as part of the development of their LRTP consistent with the TPB's [Participation Plan](#), see Appendix H for more information. But the TPB's commitment to engaging with the region's residents

extends far beyond what the federal agencies require. The TPB's policy framework has long called for a collaborative planning process that considers and reflects the interests of all TPB constituencies, and seeks to make policy and technical processes that are inclusive of and accessible to all.

Public involvement improves the quality of the regional planning process and makes it much more likely that the concepts and principles of the TPB will ultimately get implemented in a way that makes people's lives better.

The TPB has numerous practices and tools in place for regular public engagement, including an online newsletter (the TPB News), social media, websites, and public comment periods. Two community-based committees regularly advise the TPB: The Community Advisory Committee (CAC) promotes public involvement in transportation planning for the region and provides independent, region-oriented resident advice to the TPB on transportation plans and issues. The Access for



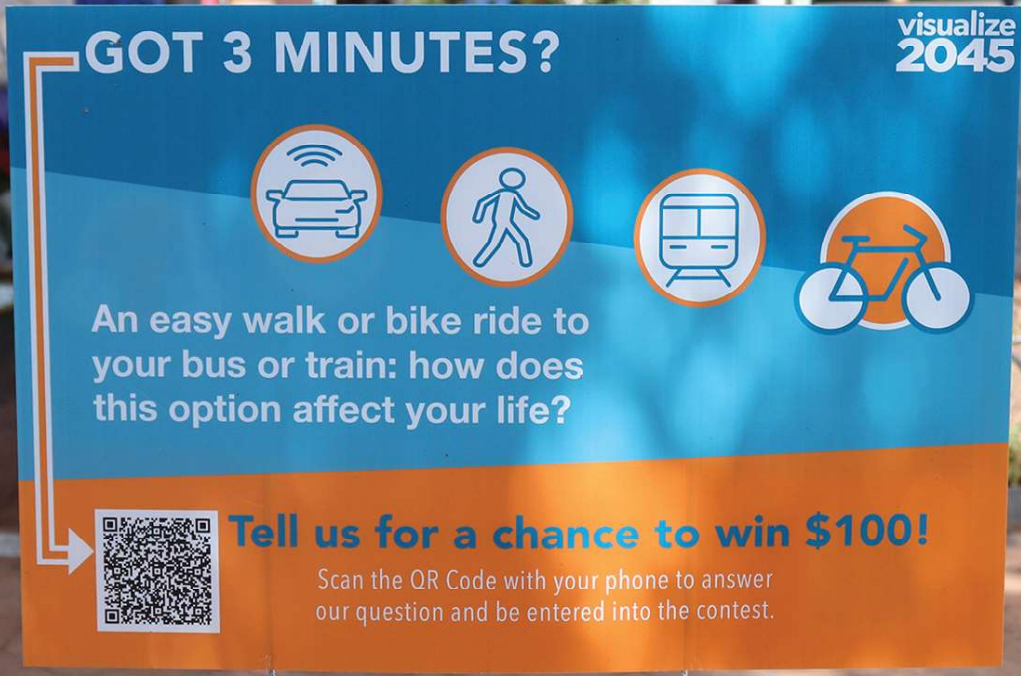
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THE TPB'S PARTICIPATION PLAN

Updated in 2020, articulated the rationale for a robust public engagement process as follows: “The TPB believes that public input into its process is valuable and makes its products better. Regional transportation planning cannot, and should not, be based simply upon technical analysis. The information derived from public involvement is essential to good decision-making.”

All Advisory Committee (AFA) advises the TPB on issues and services that are important to low-income communities, communities of color, people with limited English skills, individuals with disabilities, and older adults.

Beyond these regular TPB practices and tools, the update of Visualize 2045 offers special opportunities for intensive and focused public engagement. As the TPB's signature plan, Visualize 2045 weaves together a variety of planning activities that provide planners opportunities to ask the public about the directions the region might take.



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Voices of the Region PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Voices of the Region survey data and input, focus group, and Aspiration to Implementation feedback are featured throughout this plan. Look for the magenta boxes with the comment bubble icon to easily identify information from the Voices of the Region.

Asking People's Opinions: 2020 Survey

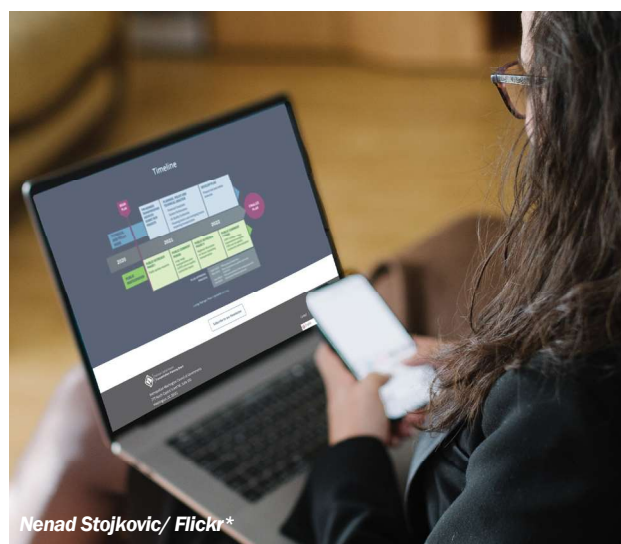
What do people think about transportation at this moment? How does it impact their lives? What do they want for the future? The TPB began its first phase of the Visualize 2045 outreach in 2020 by asking such questions. This engagement gathered information on the opinions of the region's residents through quantitative and qualitative research methods.

The TPB conducted a statistically valid public opinion survey in the fall of 2020 to collect responses from randomly selected residents across the metropolitan planning area. The survey asked about changes in travel habits during the COVID-19 pandemic and explored what the region's residents want the transportation future to look like over the next 25 years. It also asked about external forces such as climate change, driverless cars, and equity concerns.

This effort obtained 2,407 completed surveys, greatly exceeding the target of 2,000. Participants received letters in the mail that invited them to participate in a web survey that they could access using a unique code included in the letter. Respondents had the option of an English or Spanish version of the survey and were also given the option to complete the survey over the telephone.

What did we learn from the Voices of the Region survey? Here are some high-level findings:

- COVID-19 had major transportation impacts that may continue.** The survey documented the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on transportation. Two-thirds of respondents said their daily travel habits had changed a lot during the global health crisis. Sixty percent of respondents said they had been teleworking during the pandemic, up from 16 percent who said they teleworked before. Moreover, 91 percent of those currently teleworking said they would like to continue to telework, full-time or part-time, one year after the pandemic.
- Some communities are particularly vulnerable.** The needs of vulnerable populations were also highlighted, especially given the threats of COVID-19. Essential workers said they were far less likely to telecommute during the pandemic (32 percent of essential workers teleworked during the pandemic versus 82 percent of non-essential workers). Decision-makers need to prioritize the safety of these workers, many of which have lower incomes, as the region emerges from the pandemic.
- Experiences vary in different parts of the region.** The survey revealed distinctions in attitudes among different parts of the region. When asked about congestion, for example, levels of frustration varied. In the outer suburbs 54 percent of respondents said that traffic congestion was a “significant concern and it impacts the quality of my life,” compared to 27 percent of respondents in the region’s core jurisdictions. In addition, jurisdictions with more acute concerns about congestion also tended to be the places where people were less inclined to say the transportation system meets their needs. These findings highlight the importance of policies to increase transportation options for people throughout the region, particularly for those who are dependent on driving due to the lack of transportation options where housing is more affordable. Providing transportation options and land-use coordination have long been a cornerstone of the TPB’s policy framework.
- Climate change is a reality that needs to be addressed.** One thing the region seems to agree upon is the reality of climate change. In the survey, 88 percent of respondents said they believe that human actions contribute to climate change, and nearly as many, 84 percent, think elected officials should consider climate change when making decisions about transportation. The TPB is heeding this widespread sentiment; this update to Visualize 2045 lays out strategies for reducing transportation-related emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG).
- There is wide support for TPB policies.** For decades, regional leaders have been supporting common-sense steps to improve travel conditions for the people in the region. For example, there needs to be more transit options, efforts should be made to make it easier to walk and bike, and telework should be supported. The TPB’s Aspirational Initiatives embody these concepts and the survey found widespread support. For example, 71 percent of respondents say they would like to see more dedicated bus lanes and 54 percent want bus lanes even if it removes a lane of parking. Dedicated bus lanes are a key feature of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems, one of the TPB’s Aspirational Initiatives. Additional findings highlighted enhancements that would prompt people to take transit more often, such as direct, safe and shaded walking routes and shaded bus stops.



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Listening to Real Voices: Focus Groups

Building on the survey, the TPB continued its research by talking with the region's residents to better understand opinions about transportation. In the winter of 2021, the TPB conducted 11 virtual focus groups with 112 people from around the Washington region.

As a form of qualitative research, the TPB conducted these focus groups to better understand people's beliefs, experiences, and perceptions about their daily travel. Each session was created with a specific demographic or geographic focus. The TPB staff prioritized recruiting and selected participants from historically underrepresented population groups to supplement those groups that were less responsive to the survey.

Focus Groups

DEMOGRAPHICS

The TPB staff concentrated on the following demographics for individual focus groups:

- People with low income
- Young adults (18-25 years old)
- Older adults (60+ years old)
- People of color (two sessions)
- People with long-term disabilities
- Spanish-speaking people
- People with a high school degree, GED, or no degree

GEOGRAPHY

Three other sessions, which were broken out by geography, included people from:

- Outer Suburban Jurisdictions
- Inner Suburban Jurisdictions
- Jurisdictions in the Region's Core

The focus groups helped the TPB gather qualitative and in-depth data that contextualizes and informs how different population groups understand and experience transportation through the lens of three topics that relate to TPB's goals: equity, safety, and climate change. Through the lens of these three topics, the focus group discussions provided the opportunity for the participants to discuss and explore transportation issues that correspond to other TPB goal areas such as reducing congestion, improving transportation reliability, and increasing transit frequency and access, and perceptions of safety, equity, and climate. This enabled a nuanced understanding of these policy priorities underscored by tradeoffs such as cost, time, and access to opportunities.

Equity

On the topic of equity, most conversations centered on questions of affordability. Participants emphasized the cost of riding the train and bus, particularly among transit-dependent participants. Some noted that transit systems do not seem to be planned with the concerns of people with real economic needs in mind. For example, they reflected on tradeoffs that must be made. They noted that employers of low-wage jobs often do not provide transit subsidies to lower-income riders. "You have to pick and choose," said one participant. "Do you go to work?...Do you put food on the table?...There's no subsidies for people that make below a certain income and it's truly, truly unfair." Other concerns about affordability focused on housing costs and tolls.

Equity concerns were not limited to discussions about costs. Focus group participants also spoke about temporal or geographic inequities in the availability of transportation services and how that impacts access to opportunities. People that rely on transit for their transportation described the challenge of infrequent bus services, particularly important for service workers who work night hours. In suburban areas, participants spoke about the lack of transit services and dependence on driving.

Safety

Participants in the focus groups addressed the topic of safety from a number of angles, including roadway safety and fears about crime when using transit. Participants in numerous sessions said that walking and biking often feel like life-threatening activities. “No one wants to die on their way to work or their way home,” said a participant from an inner suburban location. “So, if people had truly protected bike lanes—not just like plastic barriers, but truly, truly protected bike lanes—that would be a huge thing.” Participants from the outer suburbs spoke about feeling unsafe when they drive, particularly when encountering aggressive drivers or when driving on poorly lit roads. Others expressed concerns about personal safety while using transit. Suggestions for improvements that transportation agencies could make included better lighting and more security cameras.

Climate Change

The third topic of the focus groups, climate change, was harder for participants to discuss within the context of their personal experiences. Many expressed an understanding that their individual travel choices have an impact on greenhouse gas emissions, but they also noted that environmentally friendly options are limited and often unavailable to all people or in all areas. In such conversations, participants tended to offer suggestions for improving the supply of options, including making transit more frequent and convenient, making housing close to transit more affordable, and improving electric vehicle infrastructure.

In other cases, participants were direct in saying that climate change was simply not a priority in their already challenging lives. While most participants seemed to accept the reality of climate change, they emphasized that they had more immediate concerns or felt that there was little they could personally do to make a difference for the climate. When discussing large-scale global threats, the COVID-19 pandemic was a bigger worry to many and some said the health emergency caused them to drive more, which they admitted was not good for the environment. One participant from a core jurisdiction said that when a person is in a “gas-guzzling car of whatever kind, you’re in your own little enclosed bubble and you’re safer.”

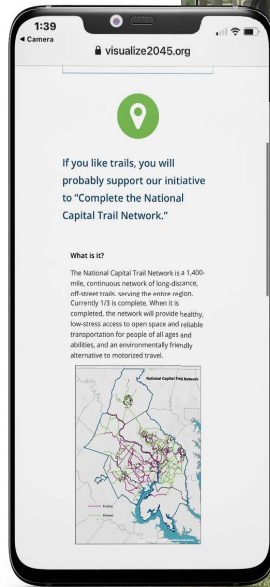


Open Opportunities for Input: Aspiration to Implementation Activity

In the summer of 2021, public engagement for Visualize 2045 moved into an open period for receiving public input. While earlier phases of outreach were invitation-only, this open phase sought input from anyone who wanted to contribute comments.

As the pandemic was not over, face-to-face engagement techniques were not appropriate for public engagement. Therefore, the TPB staff designed brightly colored posters with questions and QR codes. The posters asked participants to scan the QR code that would link to a website where participants could provide their thoughts on transportation projects, programs, and policies that have recently been implemented around the region. The TPB installed posters and signs in over 40 locations in all of the region’s jurisdictions. The locations were strategically chosen to highlight new projects, such as a new BRT line or a trail, that illustrated one of the TPB’s seven Aspirational Initiatives. Once on the website, participants were able to watch an informational video about the TPB’s Aspirational Initiatives and respond to questions that asked how a specific transportation option has impacted them.

By highlighting physical examples of actual projects, the TPB staff sought to raise awareness of the Aspirational Initiatives. The activity was designed to “meet people where they are” and ask for feedback as they interact with projects that align with the Aspirational Initiatives. The activity also allowed the public to contribute to the TPB’s discussion and analysis about these initiatives by providing input about how they impact people’s lives in the region and what might be improved or continued to ensure future success. The personal experiences documented through this outreach help to make the case that the regional policies embodied in the TPB’s Aspirational Initiatives are already making a difference in people’s lives—and could potentially be even more impactful if implementation were accelerated.



Out of 428 total written comments about how these projects types impact people's lives, the themes most frequently mentioned included time management, efficiency, convenience, travel options, access to jobs and school, family and quality of life, health and personal well-being, safety, connectivity and the environment. Sample responses are included in the Aspirational Initiatives overview in Chapter 6.

Formal Comment Periods

In addition to engaging the public in broad outreach related to transportation policies, the TPB solicits public comment during the official public comment and interagency review periods for this plan. The two comment periods include the opportunity to review the technical inputs for the Air Quality Conformity analysis and the results of the analysis, along with the draft update to Visualize 2045 and draft FY 2023-2026 TIP. The comment summaries and comment listing can be found in Appendix I, (to be finalized in June 2022.)

Ongoing Communication

The TPB's outreach and communications work is not limited to the described activities. The [Visualize 2045 website](#) provides a one-stop shop for all plan documentation and features inviting visualizations, infographics, and videos to explain the plan's many complex components. The TPB News features quick summaries of regional planning activities. In addition, the TPB live-streams meetings on the web and posts recordings for anyone to access. When the TPB conducts meetings in person, any resident is welcome to attend and to publicly address the board at the beginning of every meeting.

Two-way information sharing and engagement is a hallmark of the regional planning process. These practices will continue to be vital as the TPB, its stakeholders, and residents from across the region work together to shape a brighter future for transportation in the National Capital Region.

