

# Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council

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## PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN

### **1. Introduction**

As the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) designated by the Governor of the State of New York, the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) has the responsibility to carry out the continuous, comprehensive and cooperative transportation planning process for the Syracuse Metropolitan Area.

In 1991, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) strengthened the role of MPOs in urban transportation planning processes. In 1998 the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TEA-21) built upon ISTEA and required the planning process to include proactive public involvement and input gathering as well as providing complete information and timely public notice to communities, stakeholders, and interested parties.

The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act, a Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), the most current federal reauthorizing transportation legislation, was signed into law on August 10, 2005. SAFETEA-LU succeeds TEA-21 as the federal authorization act guiding federal highway and transit programs. A key provision of SAFETEA-LU requires that all MPOs develop and utilize a Public Participation Plan (PPP) that provides reasonable opportunities for interested parties to comment on the content of the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) and the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

It is important to note that in all of its transportation planning activities, the SMTC is required to consider and integrate the following planning factors as outlined in SAFETEA-LU:

- Support the economic vitality of the metropolitan area, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity and efficiency;
- Increase the safety of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users;
- Increase the security of the transportation system;
- Increase the accessibility and mobility options available to people and freight;
- Protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation and improve the quality of life; and promote consistency between transportation improvements and State and local planned growth and economic development patterns.
- Enhance integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes, for people and freight;

- Promote efficient system management and operation; and
- Emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system.

Engaging the public early and often in the planning process is critical to the success of any transportation plan or program, and is required by numerous state and federal laws. Such legislation underscores the need for public involvement, calling on MPOs such as the SMTC to provide citizens, affected public agencies, businesses, local government, and other interested parties with a reasonable opportunity to comment on transportation plans and programs. The public participation process needs to be well structured, proactive and inclusive in order to effectively integrate the concerns of a wide variety of affected parties. Therefore, the SMTC's goals, objectives, policies, and programs are created in direct response to the needs of the citizens in the metropolitan planning area. Determining those needs requires extensive research and active public participation.

The SMTC conducts ongoing programs and studies in order to create transportation plans that are inclusive and involve the public early in the decision making process. These programs directly address existing issues well as future transportation needs. They are expanded and modified on an ongoing basis. While public participation is mandated, it is also practical. No one organization has a monopoly on good ideas – they often evolve through an open exchange of information. It is the SMTC's intention to promote the shared obligation of the public and decision makers to define the goals and objectives of transportation planning activities undertaken by the SMTC.

The SMTC recognizes that the active involvement of the entire community, in addition to the SMTC Policy, Planning and Study Advisory Committee (SAC) members, is paramount to good transportation planning. Public comments are valued because they can shape the direction of a particular transportation study or planning activity, may help to identify new transportation projects that are important to citizens of the area, and hold the potential for new ideas and approaches.

Public participation continues to be an ongoing, interactive and collaborative process at the SMTC. Allowing stakeholders and other interested parties to have a voice in the planning process is highly encouraged and improves the plans and programs that are produced. It provides a necessary level of credibility to the planning process and ultimately, the transportation actions taken. Proper public participation leads to more informed decisions and can effectively move a project from the planning stages through implementation.

SMTC's Public Participation Policy encompasses the public involvement programs and outreach for all the major planning activities including the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP). The primary objective of the Public Participation Plan is to invite and facilitate informed public participation in SMTC's regional transportation planning and programming process.

## **2. Additional Public Involvement Requirements under SAFETEA-LU**

With the passage of the new SAFETEA-LU transportation bill, additional requirements have been placed on MPOs for the public participation components of their LRTPs. The new requirements are summarized below.

- **Participation by Interested Parties:** “Representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities” and “representatives of the disabled” have been added to the categories of stakeholders that the MPO shall provide a reasonable opportunity to comment on the transportation plan.
  - The SMTC continually incorporates Environmental Justice within its planning process, and as part of the recently completed Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan, the SMTC completed considerable outreach to the bicycle/pedestrian community and various community organizations.
  - In coordination with the CNY Regional Transportation Authority (CNYRTA), the SMTC is in the process of preparing a coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan that will help to address the transportation needs of the disabled.
  - Various agencies involved in environmental mitigation efforts have been involved in the review of this PPP.
- **Requirement for a Participation Plan:** Congress has introduced a new required item. MPOs must develop a formal plan in consultation with interested parties. This document serves as the SMTC’s PPP as required as part of the SAFETEA-LU regulations. This PPP will have a 45-day public comment period prior to the pending approval by the SMTC’s Policy Committee.
- **Visualization Techniques:** The SMTC has a history of producing visualization materials in all publications and for all public and agency meetings. The SMTC will continue to produce a variety of visualization materials ranging from simple to those involving high technology, depending on the need, such as maps, charts, graphs, photos, renderings, traffic simulations, and other types of visual materials.
- **Public Participation Methods:** For studies that require public participation, three methods shall be used “to the maximum extent practicable”. Please note that the SMTC makes every attempt to accommodate all requests for individuals with special needs:
  - “hold any public meetings at convenient and accessible locations and times;
  - “employ visualization techniques to describe plans; and
  - “make public information available in electronically accessible format and means, such as the World Wide Web, as appropriate...”

## **3. Goals**

The goals of the PPP include:

- Creating public awareness relative to the goals, objectives and processes of various SMTC studies, as well as publicizing the public participation opportunities and activities available throughout the development of SMTC studies;
- Involving the public in the transportation planning process so that transportation plans, policies and investments embrace the concerns of the traveling public, rural and urban neighborhoods, economic development interests, and other societal concerns. All public involvement processes shall provide opportunities for greater public participation in decisions relating to human health and the environment. Outreach and involvement will be extended to all affected and interested groups and individuals – minority, elderly, low-income, tribal governments, and others (Environmental Justice).

#### **4. SMTC Committee Structure**

The SMTC is comprised of three specific committees that incorporate all SMTC member agencies. The agencies that comprise the Policy Committee, Planning Committee and Executive Committee are listed below. These groups provide guidance to the SMTC's studies and public participation process. Committee attention to planning concerns may require detailed technical evaluation by Central Staff, preparation of brief policy issue papers, or identification and debate on the Committee floor. Issues may be brought to SMTC's attention at the Committee level either through contact with the staff, presentation by individual Committee members or presentations by external groups. To facilitate such interaction, all regularly scheduled business meetings are open to the public, and an expanded mailing list for agendas and important announcements is maintained. Additionally, notices of all SMTC Committee meetings are posted on the SMTC web site and press releases are sent to the local media prior to meeting dates.

##### Policy Committee

The Policy Committee consists of the elected and appointed officials representing local, state and federal governments in the metropolitan area, and meets approximately three times annually. Other meetings are scheduled as needed. Responsibilities for the Policy Committee include the general direction of the Central Staff including establishment of goals, adoption of plans and program, and approval of recommendations. Meeting announcements and agendas are prepared by the SMTC staff and disseminated in the form of a press release. All regularly scheduled business meetings are open to the public. The public is encouraged to attend and participate in the discussion of transportation issues. The Policy Committee consists of the following agencies: CNY Regional Planning & Development Board, CNY Regional Transportation Authority, City of Syracuse - Office of the Mayor, City of Syracuse Common Council - President, City of Syracuse Planning Commission, Empire State Development Corporation, Metropolitan Development Association, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, NYS Department of Transportation, NYS Thruway Authority, Onondaga County - Office of the County Executive, Onondaga County Legislature – Chair, and Onondaga County Planning Board. The Policy Committee also includes the following non-voting/advisory agencies: Federal Aviation Administration, Federal Highway Administration, Federal Transit

Administration, Madison County Board of Supervisors – Chair, and Oswego County Legislature – Chair.

#### Planning Committee

The Planning Committee is the fundamental mechanism for executing the technical aspects of continuing the transportation planning process in the Syracuse metropolitan area. The Planning Committee meets approximately four times per year, or as needed. Publicity and opportunity for public involvement follow the same guidelines as the Policy Committee. Transit operating agencies are included in this Committee to assure a balanced and intermodal approach to planning. The Planning Committee consists of the following agencies: CNY Regional Planning & Development Board, CNY Regional Transportation Authority, City of Syracuse Administration, City of Syracuse Community Development, City of Syracuse Department of Public Works, Empire State Development Corporation, Metropolitan Development Association, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, NYS Department of Transportation, NYS Thruway Authority, Onondaga County Department of Transportation, Onondaga County Legislature, and Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency. The Planning Committee also includes the following non-voting/advisory agencies: Madison County Planning Department, Oswego County Community Development, and Tourism & Planning Department.

#### Executive Committee

The Executive Committee provides oversight for the day-to-day operations of the SMTC as well as its finances. An advisory member of the Executive Committee is a representative from the host agency. The meeting announcement and agenda are sent out for dissemination. These meetings are held once a month, and are open to the public. The Executive Committee consists of the following agencies: CNY Regional Transportation Authority, City of Syracuse, NYS Department of Transportation, and Onondaga County. The Executive Committee also includes the following advisory agencies: CNY Regional Planning & Development Board, and Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency.

### **5. Study Advisory Committees, Working Groups and Stakeholder Groups**

This PPP includes the formation of multiple types of groups to assist the SMTC with various transportation planning studies. Not every group is appropriately needed for every study or project that the SMTC undertakes. These committees are created for most of the SMTC planning activities to assist in managing projects, as well as provide needed input and direction.

- **Study Advisory Committee (SAC) or Working Group (WG)** – These groups include representatives from interested agencies who have significant interest and responsibility in transportation planning and programming for the study. The SAC's or WG's role will be to advise the SMTC on the technical content of deliverables, and to provide needed input and decision-making throughout the project. The SAC or WG, consisting of representatives from affected organizations, local and state governments and agencies, and selected community representatives will meet regularly with the SMTC to assist in managing projects and provide needed input and direction.

- **Stakeholders** – A broader group of interested individuals with significant relations and interest in the project will be maintained by the SMTC. In some cases, the entire SMTC database will be treated as the stakeholders group. The stakeholders will be sent pertinent study information, kept apprised of significant study developments, notified of all public meetings, and encouraged to provide feedback and comment regarding the study or project. Separate meetings are also considered for the stakeholders group at various points during some projects, so that the SMTC may report on the progress of a study effort, and solicit input. The SMTC feels meeting with the stakeholders group on a one-on-one basis is an important strategy in gaining support and input from non-traditional partners.

## **6. Public Meetings and Public Comment Periods**

Over the years, the SMTC has taken several steps to strengthen the public involvement process. In addition to holding public meetings, the SMTC also holds numerous workshops, charrettes and informational sessions to allow the greatest opportunity for attendance by the general public and interested groups. Meetings are conducted in locations that are ADA accessible and convenient to alternative modes of transportation. Under-represented audiences are often considered when selecting a meeting location, and services for the hearing impaired are provided if requested prior to a public meeting. The SMTC thoroughly continues to reach out to a wide variety of individuals and organizations. The number of public meetings will depend on the type, intensity and length of the study.

All SAC and public meetings will be held in a handicapped accessible facility in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The SMTC will make every effort to respond to those who need a sign language interpreter, assistive learning system, or any other accommodations to facilitate the public's participation in the transportation planning process.

Some studies, such as the LRTP and TIP, require a 30 or 45 day public comment period as outlined by SAFETEA-LU legislation. The public comment periods will begin with the posting of a legal notice and a press release to the media notifying the public that the comment period is beginning. Citizens will be able to make comments during the public comment period via email, postal mail, or phone. All substantive public comments will be included in report appendices.

## **7. Project Specific Public Involvement Plans**

For many of the SMTC activities, a **project-specific** Public Involvement Plan (PIP) is created that sets the framework for the public participation opportunities that will be available throughout the course of the project. Such a proactive and dynamic PIP development process ensures the continual review of meaningful public involvement objectives and concepts, as opposed to one stagnant PIP that the SMTC must follow in all its transportation planning activities.

Depending on the nature of the project, such groups as freight shippers, business developers, property owners, community leaders, social service agencies, fire and police representatives, and/or representatives of public transit are actively sought as participants in the project process. Input from such groups is important to the success of the project in meeting identified needs. The varying PIPs also consider the differing characteristics and impacts of different geographical areas on the focus of the study. For example, the existing conditions, the transportation issues, and the corresponding recommendations for a Corridor Study are quite different from that of a Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. Thus, the SMTC will create an individual project-specific PIP for all studies, in which differing methods allow the public to better participate in the study. The PIP also pinpoints when in the project the public involvement meetings will be held that allow for the exchange of information and input. These meetings are in addition to the project SAC meetings, which are of a more technical nature and held on a more frequent basis. Public input opportunities are also provided during meetings of the SMTC Planning and Policy Committees.

## **8. Miscellaneous Public Involvement Efforts**

On an overall basis, the staff works together regularly to expand opportunities for public input on each of the projects conducted under the annual UPWP. To further increase its outreach to the public, the SMTC will be initiating and conducting a variety of public involvement activities, if appropriate to the study:

- **DIRECTIONS and other Project-Specific Newsletters:** The SMTC produces a newsletter every quarter that includes articles regarding transportation planning studies and related activities that is sent to the entire SMTC database via postal mail and/or email. In addition, the SMTC will consider producing and publishing project specific newsletters, solely dedicated to promoting an individual project in place of its regularly produced newsletter DIRECTIONS, or as a two-page insert that accompanies the DIRECTIONS newsletter. In addition to providing informational updates on the issues, efforts and ongoing tasks of the project, the newsletter will include information on how to contact the SMTC to arrange for and schedule public presentations and workshops, as well as how the public can participate and submit comments.
- **SMTC Web Site:** The SMTC maintains an extensive web site that contains a vast amount of information regarding the SMTC including “headline” information on its studies, products, public participation opportunities, and other pertinent news and developments. The web site address is [[www.smtcmpo.org](http://www.smtcmpo.org)]. The web site provides opportunities for the general public to view meeting presentations (for those who could not make a public meeting), complete a public opinion survey, or submit public comment on any transportation related issue. The web site has received a significant number of hits, has been extremely useful and cost-effective in its posting of final reports, and is becoming a site that the public relies on for meeting notices, and UPWP project updates. Most importantly, it has become another source for the public to participate in the transportation planning process.

- **Project Specific Web Sites:** The SMTC has taken advantage of the Internet and its web site by creating sub web sites specific to various individual UPWP projects. The sub sites provide general information about a project’s planning process, announce upcoming meeting dates, provide updates on the activities and progression of the project, and allow the public to participate, comment or ask questions (via the web site). For example, a sub web site for the SMTC’s Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan was created [[www.smtcmpo.org/bike-ped](http://www.smtcmpo.org/bike-ped)] and is still being utilized. In addition, sub web sites for the University Hill Transportation Study [<http://www.universityhillstudy.com/>] and the LRTP 2007 Update [<http://www.smtcmpo.org/LRTPUpdate/>] have been established as well. The SMTC will continue to use its web site for project-specific sub web sites in the future, publicizing project news, updates, and opportunities for public participation. The SMTC has received accolades from the FHWA on the content of the web site. This web site comprehensively presents the body of work of the SMTC and is freely accessible to all.
- **Material Distribution at Locations/Events Within Study Area:** If deemed necessary (at the discretion of the SAC and/or other appropriate SMTC committees), the SMTC may distribute miscellaneous project specific information at various sites throughout Onondaga County or events (e.g., Onondaga Lake Parkway Sunday’s, Corporate Challenge, Clinton Square events, Syracuse Lakefront/Inner Harbor). This information may include one or more of the following: newsletter, meeting notice, comment card, and/or public opinion surveys.
- **Assistance from SAC Members and Overall Community:** The SMTC will be asking the SAC members to assist them in better notifying citizens and the community about specific studies. Such a request is imperative in order to get the “grassroots community” involved. By helping to distribute flyers/announcements, and speaking to the members of the community about the project, the SAC will serve to further promote public involvement in areas (and to individuals) that were not reached through the standard outreach. As part of this effort, the SMTC will attempt to get articles published in newsletters and publications across Onondaga County, including the City of Syracuse.
- **Outreach to Municipalities:** A direct outreach effort will be made to municipalities throughout Onondaga County. Newsletters, flyers, press releases, meeting announcements, etc. will be sent to all town supervisors, and village/city mayors, in an effort to keep the entire community informed and involved for some studies.

The SMTC may determine that it needs to schedule individual meetings with towns, villages, etc., and their respective planning representatives to discuss conditions and issues of interest, relating to some studies.

- **Posting Information at Public Libraries:** Meeting notices and study-specific material previously mentioned will also be posted at all libraries in the Onondaga County Public Library system as deemed necessary.
- **Encouragement of Public Comment/Participation:** All citizens (especially those who are not able to attend public presentations or participate in direct contact with the SMTC staff) are encouraged to submit comments to the SMTC at any time (written correspondence or e-mail/web site communication). This message will be publicized and made clear throughout the study's project schedule, verbally, and on all study material and publications. The public is also welcome to attend any of the publicized SMTC Executive, Planning and Policy Committee meetings in which the study may be on the agenda as a discussion item.
- **Public Presentations:** The SMTC will pursue a variety of speaking engagements to share, promote, and publicize the efforts of the study (e.g., TNT meetings; FOCUS core group meetings; Town and Village Board meetings, etc.).
- **Final Reports:** The SMTC has attempted to make better use of technology in making transportation planning reports, memorandums, and documents available for public review and possession. Central staff has implemented procedures that allow for final reports to be accessed via CD-ROM, e-mail (PDF file), or accessed on the SMTC web site. The SMTC continues to make its reports available at its offices, and at local libraries throughout the MPO area.
- The public is invited to "get involved in the transportation planning process" in the SMTC brochure, *A Citizen's Guide to Transportation Planning*. This brochure, produced in November 2000, has been well received in its attempt to explain the role and purpose of the SMTC. In fact, it has been recognized by the public in its effective explanation of the MPO process (e.g. the progression and relationship of the Long-Range Transportation Plan, Unified Planning Work Program, and the Transportation Improvement Program). The SMTC plans to update this brochure in the future.
- Preparation of an **Orientation Packet**, designed to educate new SMTC Committee members, transportation agency representatives, or elected officials on the purpose and process of the SMTC and the MPO planning process;
- **Representation on the FOCUS Greater Syracuse Core Group** (an entity that conducts a visioning process for Onondaga County) has allowed the SMTC to discuss its role in the community and promote the activities and studies of the SMTC in tandem with the community's goals and visions; and
- **Media Relationships:** Continued and heightened relationship with the local media has led to increased media exposure over the past three years for the SMTC and many of its transportation planning activities. The SMTC has been

working with all mediums, TV, radio, and print, to promote the activities and public participation opportunities to the public. In addition, the SMTC has established a good working relationship with students from Syracuse University who conduct interviews for their public communications class, and the Syracuse University newspaper. This is helping to spread the SMTC news on to the college setting/environment.

- **Advertisements:** When appropriate, the SMTC has arranged for advertisements in free newspapers to expand its outreach to all populations. The SMTC has also posted various legal notices and announcements in the print media.
- **Integration and coordination with the City of Syracuse's Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today (TNT),** a citywide community development forum. The SMTC has partnered with this group in the distribution of information, and holding of public meetings in an attempt to reach more citizens in all sections of the City of Syracuse.
- **Onondaga Indian Nation:** The SMTC continues its outreach to the Onondaga Indian Nation in all of its mailings (e.g., press releases, newsletters, flyers, and public meeting announcements). Procedure has the SMTC communicating with Chief Irving Powless, Secretary, Onondaga Indian Nation. The SMTC acknowledges the added emphasis of this item under SAFETEA-LU and will continue to further these efforts.
- **Assisting other MPOs:** The SMTC has expanded its outreach to assist in promoting MPOs throughout New York State. Throughout the Spring 2002, the SMTC assisted with the design and layout of the New York State Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (NYSMPO) brochure. The SMTC's Communications Specialist designed the graphical layout, and coordinated printing efforts for a brochure that aims to promote the role and purpose of MPOs, and the significance of transportation planning in New York State.
- **Sound System:** Due to a growing complaint that a subset of individuals "could not hear" at some of our public meetings, the SMTC purchased a sound system in June 2001. This has proved to be a very useful and valuable addition to the public meetings, ensuring that the individuals are hearing about the transportation planning process.
- **Surveys:** For certain studies, the SMTC may find that a survey would add value to a particular project. For example, the SMTC has developed written surveys for the most recent LRTP Updates (2007 and 2004), as well as for the Downtown Parking Study. Depending on the nature of the survey, the survey may be available on the SMTC web site, or specifically targeted to a geographic area. In addition, the SMTC has also conducted telephone surveys

to assist with the development of its Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. Such surveys can add value and insight into SMTC projects.

## **8. Press Releases/Media Coverage**

The SMTC will issue news releases (announcing the details of all public meetings) to all major and minor newspapers, television stations, and radio well in advance of the event. If necessary, the SMTC will also send additional news releases, or take the initiative to prompt media coverage on pertinent developments pertaining to the study.

The SMTC will also explore new venues such as the Pennysaver in “helping get the word out”. Press releases and articles prepared for the SMTC newsletter DIRECTIONS will also be submitted to widely distributed publications such as the Pennysaver.

## **9. Conclusion**

It is important for the SMTC and its member agencies to understand public attitudes and values in the early stages of any study, as well as solicit input from affected citizens and community representatives. It is the SMTC’s belief that this Public Participation Plan set forth, one that solicits input frequently, will bring people inside and provide the opportunity for the public to develop greater awareness and active involvement. This is an all-encompassing guide that is intended to serve three purposes:

- To provide a documented process to guide the SMTC in involving the public;
- To guarantee to the citizens an open, fair, and equitable process; and
- To harmonize transportation plans, policies and investments with environmental concerns, reflecting an appropriate consideration of economic and social interests.

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*April 27, 2007*