



## BOSTON REGION METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

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### MEMORANDUM

**Date** June 19, 2014  
**To** Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization  
**From** Certification Activities Group, MPO Staff  
**Re** MPO Public Participation Program and Plan Update

This memorandum has been prepared to inform the MPO of recent MPO staff activity in support of updating the MPO's Public Participation Program (the Program) and Public Participation Plan (the Plan). The Program comprises activities through which MPO staff engage the public in the transportation-planning process, while the Plan explains the activities in the Program and provides the public with information about how to become involved in the MPO's transportation decision-making process through participation in Program activities.

Attached is a draft of the proposed updated Plan that incorporates the suggested recommendations.

#### 1 THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION UPDATE

The MPO's current Public Participation Plan, *Be Informed, Be Involved*, was adopted in 2007, revised in 2010, and updated in 2012. In order to keep the MPO's Program and Plan current, initiate changes to improve its effectiveness, and incorporate contemporary practices for involving and considering the needs of persons protected by Title VI and other non-discrimination requirements, MPO staff proposed an update of the Program and Plan. The update process was launched after discussion with the MPO in spring 2013.

Below is a discussion of the update process, including:

- Public participation research conducted by MPO staff
- Recommendations about how to improve the Program and Plan based on the research
- Next steps in the update process

## 2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

Staff solicited ideas from the public for improving the public-participation process during outreach for the draft Federal Fiscal Years (FFYs) 2014–2017 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), draft FFY 2014 Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), and the Transportation Equity Program Update. In particular, staff surveyed members of the public to collect input on the existing Program and ideas for the updated Program that would be documented in the Plan. Following this initial survey outreach, staff researched public-participation practices used by five MPOs in regions somewhat comparable in size and characteristics to the Boston Region MPO to learn their approaches.

### 2.1 Research Methods

This section presents a brief overview of the research methods used. See Appendix 3 of the attached draft Plan for a comprehensive review of both the survey process and techniques used by other MPOs, as well as detailed research findings and recommendations.

#### *Public Participation Survey*

MPO staff created and administered a survey for members of the public designed to gather information about how the MPO's current outreach program is working and to solicit ideas about how it might be improved. The survey posed a series of multiple-choice questions, based on current outreach methods, to gather information about:

- Preferred methods for receiving MPO news and information
- Preferred methods for providing input to the MPO
- Degree to which respondents felt their voices were heard if, in the past, they provided comments to the MPO
- Aspects of the MPO about which more information would be useful
- Additional avenues through which the MPO could raise awareness and increase participation in the transportation-planning process
- Manner in which respondents learned about this survey

The survey was made available online, and was distributed through an email notice to the MPO's email list. In print format, it was distributed at Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) subregion meetings, and MPO outreach events during May and June 2013 (see Appendix A for details).

The survey results confirm that email and the MPO website are important vehicles for public involvement. They also indicate a preference for receiving

information in succinct formats and for quick, interactive ways to exchange information (such as surveys).

### *Research on Other MPO Practices*

MPO staff conducted research on public-participation programs and plans in five MPOs of somewhat comparable size and regional characteristics. The purpose of this investigation was to learn about the public-participation methods used by these MPOs and to examine what information they included in their plans and how they presented it. Staff looked for answers to particular questions, including:

- What public-involvement approaches and activities do the MPOs use?
- Do they work with advisory or technical committees?
- How do they work with environmental-justice, low-income, limited English proficient, and other populations of special interest?
- What information do the MPOs convey in their public-participation plans?
- How are the plans structured?
- How do they use graphics and visual aids?
- How do they evaluate their programs and plans?

Predictably, there is diversity among MPOs and the approaches they use in their public-participation programs and plans. Many of the practices used by other MPO's are similar to ones the Boston Region MPO now uses, and others simply are not a good fit for Boston. However, staff's research identified some interesting methods and activities that could be adopted here. In particular, the research uncovered additional ways in which the MPO could respond to the needs of minority, low-income, limited English proficient, and other populations protected under federal and state laws and regulations.

## **3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on information gathered from the survey, research on other MPOs, and current communications best practices, staff identified a number of feasible new initiatives that would improve the MPO's Public Participation Program and Plan. They include the following, which have been incorporated into the draft Public Participation Plan:

- Partner with Advisory Council and MAPC to sponsor special-issue forums
- Increase number of outreach contacts by collaborating with Advisory Council and MAPC and other organizations
- Collaborate with public libraries and explore ways they can make MPO information available to the public

- Evaluate the Program's effectiveness more frequently
- Distribute current information more frequently via News Flashes on website's homepage, and maximize the reach of News Flash information by also distributing it via short press releases
- Collect public input on specific, targeted topics through more frequent surveys on MPO website
- Use visualization techniques to communicate quickly and effectively through high-quality graphics (ensuring that information conveyed graphically also is accessible to those with visual impairments)
- Improve public-participation page on MPO website to provide information on the Program and other MPO items in a succinct and easy-to-follow format
- Facilitate participation of populations with limited English proficiency by:
  - Increasing number of languages into which the MPO regularly translates meeting notices and other vital MPO documents from the current two to three—Spanish, Chinese, and Portuguese—as a matter of policy
  - Posting translations of vital documents, and meeting and other notices on MPO website
  - Translating outreach materials for specific public meetings into language(s) prevalent in geographic location of the meeting
  - Consulting with local leaders on language needs and cultural issues
- Encourage participation of individuals with low literacy, or no or low vision by:
  - Recording their spoken comments, as an alternative to writing them
  - Providing limited number of large-print versions of agendas and other key materials at MPO meetings (even if attendees have not requested them in advance, as we now ask them to do in our outreach materials)

These initiatives would augment the already-extensive endeavors of the MPO to include the broadest cross-section of the public, in keeping with federal and state civil-rights requirements.

#### 4 NEXT STEPS

After the MPO reviews the attached draft Plan and provides input, staff will implement the following steps to initiate the public outreach process and develop the final Plan, which will be brought back to the MPO in October, 2014 for approval:

- Present draft updated Plan to MPO (June 19)
- Revise document to incorporate MPO comments and additional graphics (June and July)
- Request MPO approval to release for 45-day public review (August 7)
- Post draft updated Plan on MPO website and start public comment period (August 11)
- Present draft updated Plan to Advisory Council (August or September)
- Conduct public meetings and web-based survey on draft updated Plan (September)
- Receive public comments on draft Plan (August and September)
- End public comment period (September 24)
- Incorporate public feedback and prepare final text for MPO endorsement of updated Program and Plan (September 25 and 26)
- Request MPO endorsement of final updated Program and Plan (October 2)

KQ/PW/pw