



TPO staff at an event for the Safe Access to Parks Study

6. Public Input Results

During this evaluation period the TPO continued to bolster current ways and determine new avenues to have meaningful input. Comments were received from a variety of sources, ranging from mobile and desktop devices to phone calls and letters. The TPO attempted to respond to all requests for information and questions in a timely manner. When appropriate, the TPO staff recommended that implementing agencies work closely with affected stakeholders to address specific needs or concerns associated with future

Extensive public outreach conducted for major initiatives and studies during 2020 and 2021 were designed to seek ongoing public engagement early and often. Public and stakeholder involvement was crucial in identifying issues, developing goals and objectives, proposing alternatives, and prioritizing strategies. These efforts are to maximize the likelihood that final products have broad community support when brought to the TPO for adoption and reduce the likelihood that plans and studies need to undertake extensive revisions. Some of the highlights of public input in the TPO's initiatives and studies are summarized below.

Major TPO projects with substantial public input

Nondiscrimination and Equity Plan

In an effort to create and solidify relationships with underrepresented communities, staff carried out a targeted engagement strategy to collect input from communities of concern for the 2021 update of the Nondiscrimination and Equity Plan. By going into communities of concern to administer surveys, staff oversampled low-income people of color for input. As a result of the public input collected through these engagement activities, the Nondiscrimination and Equity Plan implements a process called the Equity Approach. This approach involves policy changes that staff can integrate into TPO plans and processes to improve the quality of life of all residents of Hillsborough County, particularly for the most underserved citizens and communities. A few recommendations in the Equity Approach include:

- Tailor public engagement methods to reach underserved communities.
- Expand community representation on TPO advisory committees.
- Coordinate with other jurisdictions to tackle complex equity issues

Additional recommendations found in the Nondiscrimination and Equity Plan include:

- Better advertisement of existing programs
- Meet community where they're at
- Create genuine relationships
- Ensure true representation



Transportation Improvement Plan

In 2021, the TPO approved its Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), a five-year plan that included \$3.1 billion in funding for local transportation projects. During the five-hour-long meeting, Board members heard recommendations from TPO staff, FDOT District 7 Secretary David Gwynn, and the public. Projects proposed for I-275 through Tampa Heights and Seminole Heights as well as the I-4/I-275 Downtown Interchange (DTI) caused lengthy public comment and debate; the topic garnered 31 comments via email, voicemail, and social media in advance of the meeting in addition to 20 public comments during the meeting.

Most of the public's concerns revolved around FDOT's quick-fix project to address traffic congestion at the DTI. The proposed project included the following changes:

- The addition of a new exit in the Ybor City area
- The construction of additional lanes on ramps of the DTI which would require the acquisition of right-of-way

The TPO board supported the quick-fix concept by adopting it into the 2045 long range transportation plan after a public hearing in November 2019. This decision was informed by the TPO's largest ever public opinion survey of summer 2019, which garnered more than 5000 responses. The survey described the quick-fix concept as requiring no new parcel acquisition. By November 2019, FDOT had clarified that about 10 parcels would need to be acquired. This information was provided in a deep-dive presentation about implications of the DTI project to the TPO board in October 2019. The quick-fix concept was chosen because it provided some safety and traffic flow benefits, remaining the least impactful concept in terms of right of way acquisition. Other concepts for the DTI required 10-20 times as many parcels to be acquired.

The quick-fix concept first appeared in the TPO list of priority projects in the TIP adopted in June 2019. At that time, the TIP described the quick-fix concept as requiring no parcel acquisition. In the TIP adopted the following year, June 2020, TPO staff did not update the description from zero parcels to around 10 parcels. TPO staff also did not update the list of priority projects the following year — in the TIP adopted in June 2021 — in spite of the fact that funds to acquire those parcels were added to the TIP in a TIP amendment approved May 2021. This oversight did not live up to the TPO's commitment to public access to accurate information.

During the 2021 TIP public hearing, the TPO Board considered the public's concerns about the project. However, they decided the project was too far along in development to remove from the TIP. FDOT was also concerned about jeopardizing Federal funding for the project. Subsequently, the Board voted to approve the TIP 11-4. But it came at a price: The TPO found itself in a position of broken trust with some community members.

To rebuild trust within the community, the TPO will more diligently research projects presented for the TIP. The TPO has also implemented an equity scoring system to make sure projects are supporting the needs of communities of concern.

Safe Access to Parks Pilot Study

TPO staff conducted public outreach for the Safe Access to Parks pilot project through collaboration with an agency stakeholder group, online public outreach, and in-person public outreach. Additionally, regular presentations were made to the Hillsborough TPO committees to provide updates on the project and to receive feedback. A website to share project information was developed, with links to an online web map and an online survey. The web map and survey were developed in both English and Spanish and were open to the public from mid-August through early November 2021. Between the three parks, there were over 95 unique responses to the online survey and over 115 comments on the web map. To help inform people who use the park on a regular basis about the outreach, yard signs and flyers were placed around the park and distributed to people who have connections to the park. As a result of the outreach, recommendations included the traffic signal timing strategies to reduce red light-running and the use of paint to emphasize intersection points of bike lanes, sidewalks, and roads.

Plant City Transit Feasibility Study

The TPO collaborated with the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit (HART) and the City of Plant City to create a Transit Plan for the City of Plant City. Through a series of Stakeholder Focus Group Meetings, Public Open House Meetings, and Travel Market Analysis, the study team identified various alternatives for circulator routes within Plant City, an express bus to Downtown Tampa, and a service to Lakeland. The most preferred alternative based on public input was a set of two fixed routes which would circulate through Plant City, connecting the downtown area, a local Walmart, Plant City High School, and the Strawberry Festival grounds. Based on this input, the Study suggests HART and Plant City further coordinate to identify funding sources.

