GASTON-CLEVELAND-LINCOLN MPO
Metropolitan Planning Organization

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN FOR THE GASTON-CLEVELAND-LINCOLN METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

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PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN FOR THE GASTON-CLEVELAND-LINCOLN MPO AREA

Study Area Profile and the Planning Process

Gaston, Cleveland, and Lincoln counties are within the Piedmont region of North Carolina and are part of the Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area. The region is a mix of rural, suburban, and urban development and character with a sprawling urban core that includes over one-third of the persons living in the three counties. One of the unique features of this urban area is the number of incorporated municipalities. Including Gastonia, which is the largest city, there are 18 municipalities participating in the governance of the GCLMPO.

The U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, 23 CFR Section 450.316 guides the development of public participation plans for transportation planning process. The United States Department of Transportation, through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) require:

> "...each urbanized area, as a condition to the receipt of Federal capital or operating assistance, have a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive transportation planning process that results in plans and programs consistent with the comprehensive planned development of the urbanized area"

These federal regulations require a single agency be responsible for the implementation of the urban transportation planning process in each urbanized area. This agency is designated as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the study area. In the Gastonia Urbanized Area, this function is fulfilled by the Gaston-Cleveland-Lincoln Metropolitan Planning Organization Board and is advised by the Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC). The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) states voting members are elected officials appointed by their respective board or council to serve as each jurisdictions representative. The TCC are members of the individual member governments and NCDOT staff that review the technical aspects of all transportation planning including roads, greenways, transit and bicycle and pedestrian planning.

The Board ensures that a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive (3C) planning process exists in the study area. The Federal Register states that: "The urban transportation planning process shall include the development of a transportation plan consisting of a transportation systems element for each mode out to twenty (20) years. The transportation plan shall be reviewed every four (4) years or earlier if needed to confirm its validity and its consistency with current transportation and land use conditions."

For the Gaston-Cleveland-Lincoln MPO area, the North Carolina Department of Transportation has led the development of Thoroughfare Plans, now known as Comprehensive Transportation Plans (CTPs). However, MPO staff leads the development of Metropolitan Transportation Plans (MTPs), project prioritizations for Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) development, and a range of smaller transportation plans and programs. This work frequently involves travel demand model development, which can take months to calibrate. These models are used to evaluate the various alternatives proposed during the planning process. The local planners and MPO staff provide demographic information and alternatives needed for the modeling. Much of this work is performed in coordination with the City of Charlotte Department of Transportation (CDOT), who

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has been responsible for managing the Metrolina Regional Travel Demand Model (MRM) since its inception. The decision to have one (1) agency, CDOT, perform this work is to better provide the uniform and consistent data collection and output necessary for regional compliance for plan development and conformity determination reports for demonstrating progress in addressing Ozone non-attainment as established by US Environmental Protection Agency.

GCLMPO Contact List

The MPO will maintain a distribution list of all Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) and Board members, their alternates and non-voting members stipulated in the MPO's MOU and bylaws, who shall be apprised of all upcoming meetings and opportunities for comment on MPO plans and related documents. These TCC and Board rosters will include representatives of local governments as well as the NCDOT, FHWA, FTA and other local transportation agencies, such as transit, airports and non-motorized modes.

The MPO will maintain an e-mail and mailing list of any interested person or organization who wishes to be made aware of all upcoming meetings, projects and opportunities for comment. The MPO will make specific attempts to include representatives of the following groups:

- Freight and Economic Development: Freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, and economic development professionals;
- Environmental: Federal, state, and local environmental protection organizations and advocates;
- Land use: Land use planners;
- Aviation: Area airport representatives;
- Non-automotive Transportation: Bicycle and pedestrian advocates, planners, and users;
- Public Transportation: Public transportation, representatives of disabled persons, representatives of users of public transportation, governmental and non-profit providers of non-emergency medical transportation;
- Elderly, disabled, minority, limited English proficiency (LEP) populations; advocacy groups, etc.

Public Notice and Comment Periods

The MPO will provide adequate notice of upcoming meetings, as well as duration to public input and comment periods, in order to allow affected parties to review materials and submit comments. The public and interested parties will be notified by means listed under "Strategies to Solicit Public Input."

The MPO will provide a minimum of seven (7) days' notice for all upcoming public meetings, and all public comment periods will be 30 days, unless otherwise noted in this Public Participation Plan. Public comments will be accepted via in-person meetings, USPS mail, and/or by virtual means (email, Online GIS platforms, etc.).

All public comment provided to the MPO will be reviewed by the MPO staff and conveyed to the Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) and MPO Board for consideration.

A written response to public comments, if warranted, will be made within 30 days after the TCC and MPO Board have reviewed the comments.

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MPO Public Input and Comment Activities

All TCC and Board meetings are open to the public and include a public comment period. Public input or other participation is encouraged and welcomed at both the TCC and MPO Board meetings and will be allowed up to three (3) minutes per person or five (5) minutes per group. The following processes include, but are not limited to projects, project lists, programs, plans and policy updates or development necessitating public comment or input:

1. **Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)**
   The MPO will solicit public input at the beginning of the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) development cycle to update the MPO's candidate project list as well as the project ranking process for submittal to the NCDOT for consideration in developing the Statewide TIP (STIP). In addition, the MPO will solicit public input during the local input point assignment process for Regional Impact and Division Needs projects. The public comment periods for both Regional Impact and Division Needs Tiers will total no less than thirty (30) days. More information can be found in the GCLMPO's Local Input Point Methodology, located on the MPO's website.

2. **Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Program (MTIP)**
   The MPO will solicit public input when adopting modifications to the local Metropolitan TIP (MTIP) periodically *when a formal amendment is required.* Public input will not be solicited for administrative modifications to the MTIP.

   Formal/Major Amendments require documentation of a 30-day public review and public comment opportunity at the TCC and MPO Board meetings. Also, the amendment may require re-demonstration of fiscal constraint and local transportation conformity determination. Fiscal constraint may be shown by either the project cost impact being less than 5% of the expected annual budget or by showing other project cost reductions and/or revenue increases within the affected fiscal year(s).

   Examples of Formal Amendments:
   - Change in a unique project phase cost beyond a predetermined threshold; increases in highway projects that exceed both $2 million and 25% of the original cost and may affect fiscal constraint and changes (increases or decreases) in transit projects that exceed either $1 million or 25% of the original project cost;
   - Any addition or deletion of a federally funded project to the first four (4) years of the Program;
   - Addition or deletion of any regionally significant project into the first four (4) years of the Program;
   - Change in project design or scope that significantly changes the termini or project type, purpose, or number of through lanes on a non-exempt (for transportation purposes) project;
   - Any addition, deletion or significant modification of non-traditional funding source to a project (traditional sources of revenue include federal, state, or local government tax revenues. Non-traditional sources include state bonding and/or private participation);
   - Project schedule shifts that move ROW, major capital acquisitions, or construction authorization dates either into or out of the four (4) year STIP time window;

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- Project schedule shifts in years one (1) through four (4) that move project completion dates across Horizon Years as determined by the local Metropolitan Transportation plan;

Administrative Modifications do not require documentation of public review or comment, re-demonstration of fiscal constraint, or a transportation conformity determination.

Examples of Administrative Modifications:

- Any change to projects in years five (5) or later of the STIP;
- Minor change to project descriptions, scopes, sponsor funding;
- Minor cost increases in highway projects that do not exceed both $2 million and 25% of the original project cost;
- Minor cost change (increase or decrease) in transit projects that do not exceed either $1 million or 25% of the original project cost;
- Addition or deletion of a state funded project that is determined to not be regionally significant;
- An existing project or project segment (project break) is sub-divided into two (2) or more sub-segments without changing the overall project scope or description and both pieces remain in the first four (4) year period of an approved STIP;
- Schedule changes that move project authorization dates within the first four (4) year STIP time window and do not affect local air quality conformity findings;
- Funding source changes between traditional funding sources (i.e. substituting available Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) funds for FTA Section 5307 formula transit funds);
- Projects approved for Emergency Relief funds do not generally have to be included in the STIP, so any changes made for emergency projects may be considered minor modifications.

State funded projects are amended when the fiscal year changes or when there is a significant change in the project description. Unless the project is determined to be regionally significant for transportation conformity purposes these amendments are approved solely by the State Board of Transportation. Local approval of these changes is desired but not legally required. The GCLMPO may treat these as Administrative Modifications if the Board so chooses. If there is a change to a state funded project that is regionally significant this requires a new transportation conformity determination and this determination must be made before the amendment can be processed. The state public notification process will be the same for state funded projects as it is for federal-aid projects.

3. **Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) Development:** The MPO will solicit input on the draft UPWP outlining the work tasks for the upcoming fiscal year following the posting of the TCC agenda, seven (7) days prior to the meeting, allowing a minimum of fourteen (14) days for public comment prior to the adoption by the Board. The same will apply for amendments to the UPWP.

4. **Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) Development:** The MPO may choose to identify a steering committee comprised of members of the public as well as the TCC and MPO Board to oversee a significant update of a CTP. This update may involve periodic public input meetings to help guide the committee's work. For amendments to the CTP, please reference the CTP Amendment Policy. Two types of amendments may be requested: Administrative and

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Procedural. Administrative Amendments do not require public involvement. Procedural Amendments require a full public engagement process, including a thirty (30) day public comment period, and one (1) public meeting. The MPO will also accept public comments at the MPO TCC and Board meetings for Procedural Amendments.

5. **Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP):** MPO staff will release a draft MTP and supporting conformity documents for 30-day public comment periods. The two (2) documents will be presented to the public at a series of public meetings with one (1) meeting each in Gaston, Cleveland and Lincoln counties. Verbal, written and email comments will be received and presented to the TCC and MPO Board for consideration. The TCC and MPO Board will recommend and approve the MTP and corresponding conformity report at their first meeting following a 30-day comment period. Major amendments to the MTP, including conformity (if needed), will also be released for public comment for thirty (30) days and a public comment opportunity given at the TCC and MPO Board meetings.

6. **Public Participation Plan (PPP):** Formal amendments to the PPP require documentation of a 45-day public review, public comment opportunity and a public meeting. (23 CFR 450.316 (3))

7. **Performance Measures:** The MPO will seek public input via a 30-day public comment period when initially adopting performance measures. Subsequent amendments will be announced via the TCC and Board agenda packets seven (7) days prior to a meeting.

Title VI Policy Statement

It is the policy of GCLMPO, as a federal-aid recipient, to ensure that no person shall, on the ground of race, color, national origin, Limited English Proficiency, sex, age, or disability, (and low-income, where applicable), be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be otherwise subjected to discrimination under any of our programs and activities, as provided by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Orders 12898 and 13166, the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, and other pertinent nondiscrimination authorities.

If you feel you have been subjected to discrimination, you may file a complaint. Allegations of discrimination should be promptly reported to our Title VI Coordinator.

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The GCLMPO Title VI Program Plan can be accessed at **www.gclmpo.org/TitleVI.** To respond to the ever-changing demographics of our population we must use a range of methods to reach all populations. The end goal is to involve minority, low-income and limited English proficiency populations in the transportation decision-making process. To accomplish this, we must solicit adequate, effective, and meaningful participation by understanding unique needs, cultural perspectives and financial limitations of different socioeconomic groups.

The MPO attempts to increase participation of these groups by translating public input documents into Spanish and by holding multiple meetings.

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Public Participation Processes and Strategies

The GCLMPO commits to the following strategies, as appropriate, for effective public participation in transportation planning in its study area.

- **Newspapers:** The GCLMPO will send news releases to major newspapers of record in each of the three counties. These news releases will be sent at least seven (7) days in advance of any public meeting pertaining to revised or new planning documents as required.
- **Legal Advertisements/Notice of Public Meetings:** Once per year the GCLMPO will advertise, in the major newspaper of record in each of the three (3) counties, all MPO Board and TCC meeting dates (for the calendar year) including the website address and physical location where the agendas will be available for review. If a meeting date changes, a new legal advertisement will be released.
- **Posting of Public Meetings for major planning documents:** The GCLMPO will distribute news releases, post on the GCLMPO website and email via the GCLMPO Contact List. In addition, the GCLMPO will post to traditional outlets such as municipal offices with populations greater than 3,000 persons as of the 2010 Census.
- **Social Media:** The GCLMPO will maintain a presence on various social media websites including Facebook and Twitter where upcoming meetings as well as news and updates will be posted regularly.
- **Internet:** The GCLMPO will maintain a Section 508/Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant website. All programs and projects developed by the MPO will be posted to the website (**www.gclmpo.org)**. Hyperlinks to the NCDOT, local governments and other relevant transportation related programs or projects will be included on the website. The website will include announcements of upcoming meetings and opportunities for public input. This Public Participation Plan will be included on the website.
- **Public Participation Email List:** The MPO will maintain an e-mail list of any interested person or organization who wishes to be made aware of all upcoming meetings, projects and opportunities for public comment. You can sign up for this list on the MPO's website.
- **Meeting Locations:**
    a. The GCLMPO will attempt to hold public comment and input meetings and utilize bulletin boards in public and/or government buildings (City Halls, Public Libraries, etc.) and other media forms for information dissemination and will attempt to notify Title VI population groups of meetings. In some instances, it may be necessary to hold public meetings virtually due to extenuating circumstances such as a Governor-declared state of emergency, local emergencies or severe inclement weather.
    b. The GCLMPO will update its website and social media regarding meeting locations, method of meeting and possible meeting location changes when possible as soon as changes are determined by the Chairman.
    c. MPO meetings: At the Gastonia Police Department; 200 Long Avenue; Gastonia, NC unless otherwise advertised. In some instances, it may be necessary to hold meetings virtually due to extenuating circumstances such as a Governor-declared state of emergency, local emergencies or severe inclement weather. If changes need to be made to the location or method of meeting the public will be notified at least seven (7) days in advance.
    d. TCC meetings: Gaston County Administration Building; Room 3A; 128 West Main Avenue, Gastonia, NC unless otherwise advertised. In some instances, it may be

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necessary to hold meetings virtually, due to extenuating circumstances such as a Governor-declared state of emergency, local emergencies or severe inclement weather. If changes need to be made to the location or method of meeting the public will be notified at least seven (7) days in advance.

- **Program and Sub-Committee meetings:** To the extent possible, GCLMPO meetings will be held in ADA-accessible locations along scheduled public transportation routes.
- **Meeting Format:** the MPO will employ visualization techniques to describe metropolitan transportation plans, TIPs, and other related documents. This will typically mean displaying information as maps, graphs, tables and charts in addition to written documents. MPO staff will present information verbally as well as through printed materials.
- **Meeting Times for TCC and MPO Board Meetings**: Regular meetings for both GCLMPO boards will be held bi-monthly beginning in January and in each odd-numbered month of the year, unless otherwise determined by the Board. The MPO Board will typically meet at 6:30 pm on the fourth Thursday of the month, unless otherwise advertised. The TCC will meet regularly at 10:00 am on the second Wednesday of the odd-numbered months of the year, unless otherwise advertised.
- **Board Meeting Agenda Packets -** The agenda will be electronically transmitted and posted on the MPO webpage at least seven (7) days in advance of any Board meetings. If any person or organization wishes to receive a hard copy they can request this by contacting GCLMPO staff in advance of the meeting.
- **Meeting Times for Public Participation Meetings:** MPO staff will work to schedule meetings at times convenient to the general public, with both day and evening meetings scheduled when possible.
- **Coordination with the NCDOT and Other Agencies:** The GCLMPO will coordinate with the NCDOT and other related agencies whenever possible in order to maximize the effectiveness of concurrent public outreach and public comment events and processes.
- **Translation:** The GCLMPO will provide translation of any requested documents into another language within a reasonable period of time.
- **Environmental Justice (EJ):** The MPO will distribute announcements of upcoming meetings and opportunities for public input to persons or organizations identified in the Title VI Program Plan.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Updates

GCLMPO staff will evaluate the effectiveness of this Public Participation Plan (PPP) a minimum of every two (2) years, or if modifications are necessary. The results of this evaluation will be presented to the TCC and Board for their feedback, recommendation and adoption of a modified PPP if necessary.

While this PPP does not list specific performance criteria we will track the number of attendees at public comment meetings, tracking the frequency of and geographic location of public meetings, tracking visitor trends on the MPO website, the number of comments received from the public, or the public comment period and any personal information provided.

Any recommended updates to this plan shall be available to the public for forty-five (45) calendar days before the revised document is adopted by the MPO. Copies of the updated public participation plan shall be distributed based on this policy and a copy provided to the NCDOT, FHWA and FTA for their records as well as posted on the MPO's website.

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Social Media External Use Policy

Comments and Interactions

The GCLMPO reserves the right to repost, share, like, or retweet content from another social media account. A like, share, or retweet of content does not imply an endorsement of that account. Likewise, comments expressed on any MPO social media page do not necessarily reflect the opinions and position of the GCLMPO, its individual members, administrators or employees. In addition to information provided by the GCLMPO, the social media sites may contain comments and opinions from unrelated third parties which are being provided as a convenience to the public and for informational purposes only. These comments or opinions do not constitute an endorsement or an approval by the GCLMPO of any of the views or comments posted on the GCLMPO's social media pages. Furthermore, the GCLMPO bears no responsibility for the accuracy or legality of these materials. When in doubt, the GCLMPO will take a very conservative approach to what appears through social media.

Third party comments will be rejected or removed (if possible) when the content:

- Is off-subject or out of context;
- Contains obscenity or material that appeals to the prurient interest;
- Contains personal identifying information or sensitive personal information;
- Contains offensive terms that target protected classes;
- Is threatening, harassing, defamatory or discriminatory;
- Contains any copyrighted material owned by a third party;
- Circumvents Public Records and Open Meetings Laws;
- Incites or promotes violence or illegal activities;
- Contains information that reasonably could compromise individual or public safety;
- Advertises or promotes a commercial product or service, or any entity or individual.

Moderation of Third Party Content

The MPO's social media sites serve as a limited public forum and all content published is subject to monitoring. In the same manner as a public forum, user-generated posts should be suitable in terms of time, manner and place. The GCLMPO reserves the right to publish any posting, or to later remove it based on the aforementioned guidelines.

While endorsing the proper use of the limited public forum on the MPO's social media platforms the GCLMPO cannot guarantee that violations will not take place. If a comment violates these guidelines, the GCLMPO reserves the right to remove or hide a comment without prior notification.

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