



TRANSIT PLANNING WITH VIRTUAL VOICES: INCLUSIVE ONLINE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND OLDER ADULTS

Issue Number Four

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This brief is a part of the “Strategies for Promoting Civic Engagement in Inclusive Transportation Planning”, a four-part brief series sponsored by the [Transit Planning 4 All project](https://transitplanning4all.org/). The briefs present key tips for enhancing inclusion through four civic engagement strategies: community mapping, focus groups, public forums, and online platforms.

To read other briefs in this series, visit <https://transitplanning4all.org/>.

Civic engagement is key to improving the quality of life within any community. Promoting effective and inclusive participation among all citizens leads to decision-making that is reflective of a diverse range of individuals and groups. A sustainable transportation system that meets the needs of its users requires inclusive planning at the city, regional, and state levels. If inclusive transit planning is done effectively, it balances the needs of multiple stakeholders, accounting for the social, political, and economic compounding factors within unique geographic locations.

To meet the ultimate goals of improving outcomes for entire communities and creating transportation systems that are fully responsive to community needs, the process of inclusion should involve a variety of ways for citizens to participate in the decision-making process at the individual, group, and community-wide levels. For example, strategies for civic engagement may include community mapping, focus groups, in-person public forums and meetings, and online platforms. This brief focuses on the use of online platforms to promote civic engagement strategies inclusive of people with disabilities and older adults.

Using Online Platforms for Civic Engagement

Civic engagement can serve as a key strategy to influence change related to enhancing policy-making processes, social integration, and self-efficacy (Parker Harris, 2012). In his book, *Nothing About Us Without Us*, disability advocate Jim Charlton also describes civic engagement as “a vital strategy for people with disabilities to raise consciousness and to engage in grassroots advocacy for change, thereby ensuring that new policies do not continue the cycles of political marginalization historically experienced by people with disabilities” (2000). While inclusive civic engagement is of utmost importance, individuals with disabilities, older adults, and other marginalized communities often face challenges to participating in in-person opportunities, due to transportation obstacles and communication barriers.

Online engagement refers to the ways in which people participate in the economic, political, social and cultural life of a community through interactive social and media platforms. This method of engagement takes place through various virtual platforms. These include online meetings, workshops, and forums; webinars; online surveys; and social media. These platforms also include tools and apps specifically designed for online engagement and planning. Participation through online platforms can identify problems and solutions and increase awareness on particular transportation issues, programs, and policies.

Online civic engagement is a solution that enables community members to contribute anytime and anywhere,

Inclusive Online Engagement Goals:

- » *Reach more diverse residents*
- » *Generate more informed participation*
- » *Invite a broader range of perspectives*
- » *Produce concrete data for reporting and evaluation*
- » *Sustain participation*

*Reference: Stuart Clark, 2015

allowing people to take part in discussions that are interactive and highly visual. Online civic engagement is less reliant on individuals having to be at a specific physical location and provide input at specific times. In addition, online platforms can provide the community with real-time information and can often be portable, through the use of mobile or electronic devices. Research indicates that some people with disabilities prefer the method of online civic engagement because technology “facilitates independence and gives people a voice” (Parker Harris et al., 2012). As identified in the Community Engagement Toolkit for Planning (2017), the benefits of online engagement also include providing:

- a convenient, accessible, and engaging option for getting older adults and people with mobility, vision, or hearing impairments involved;
- tools that can bring more people into conversations that affect their community;
- a secure space for people to learn and test assumptions, positions, and options;
- cost-effective and efficient ways of engaging with more participants directly;
- improved organizational transparency and responsiveness; and
- support for community ownership across all levels of the engagement spectrum.

Determining Appropriate Online Platforms

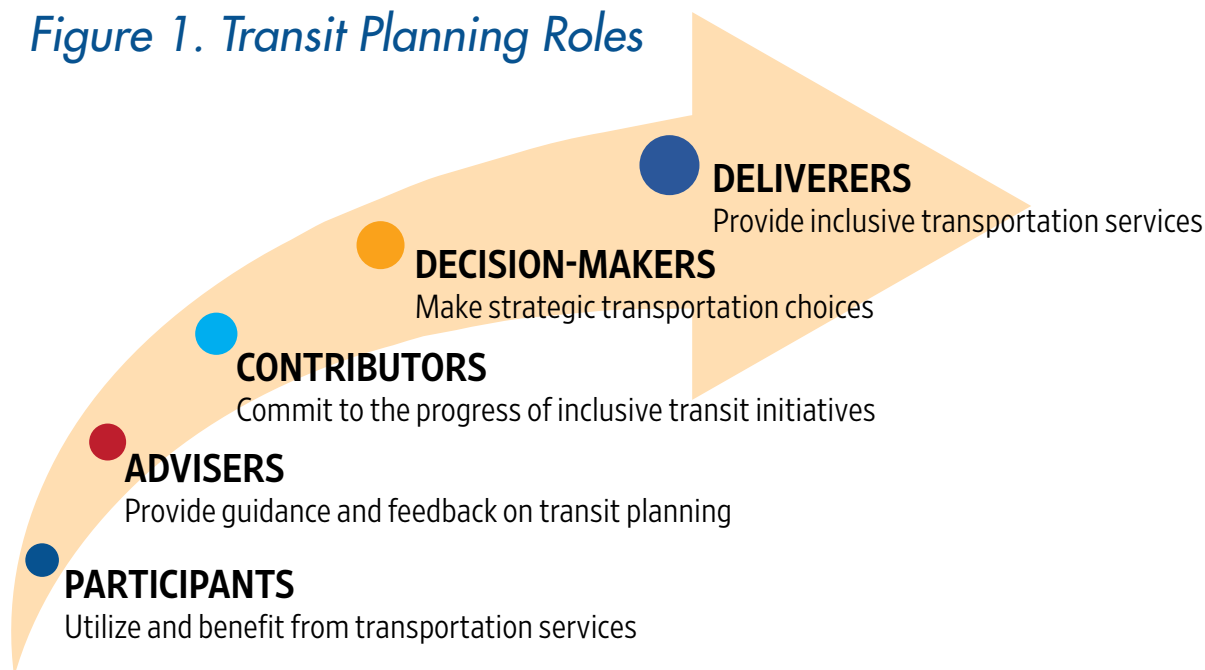
When considering which online platform is best, start by clarifying your goals at the outset, as well as clarifying the intended purpose of the outreach and engagement. Clearly define the purpose of the engagement strategy and how the input from it will be used to support the engagement strategy. Some guiding principles include (Stuart Clark, 2015):

- Set clear roles and expectations for staff, elected officials, and transit providers.
- Identify the desired audiences and associated communication strategies.
- Develop and present community-oriented questions and information.
- Establish and analyze success criteria.

Once you have clearly defined goals and purposes, identify online platform(s) with features that will support the goals and objectives of engagement. Recognize that you may need a variety of methods and platforms to ensure an inclusive engagement process.

The appropriate strategy for engagement may depend on the level of participation pursued from members of the community. As captured in Figure 1, individuals can serve as participants, advisers, contributors, decision-makers, or deliverers of products and services that enhance transportation for all.

Figure 1. Transit Planning Roles



Overcoming Barriers to Inclusion Online

While online tools can increase participation and be used as organizing tools that provide up-to-date information, establishing an infrastructure for engagement that meets the diverse needs of community members is key to encouraging active participation. There are several challenges when it comes to the full inclusion of online participation for people with disabilities and older adults (Raja, 2016). These challenges include:

- Lack of internet access
- Cost/affordability
- Availability
- Accessibility
- Lack of knowledge in how to use certain technologies
- Lack of regulation for accessibility of technology platforms

Research has also found that a higher percentage of disabled and older Americans are less likely to use technology, although this has been evolving. According to a report from the Pew Research Center, individuals with disabilities are three times more likely than those without disabilities to never go online (23% vs. 8%) (Anderson & Perrin, 2017), and only 40% of Americans age 65 and older use social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter. However, the percentage of social media use has been steadily increasing over time (Pew Research Center, 2020). The Pew Research Center also notes that while traditionally, American seniors have been late adopters in the world of technology, “their movement into digital life continues to deepen” (Smith, 2014), with roughly two-thirds of those ages 65 and older going online with increased use of smartphones (Anderson & Perrin, 2017). This presents new opportunities to involve older adults and people with disabilities in the development of online platforms, especially including them in the design process, establishing a meaningful feedback loop, and working in collaboration with organizations and networks that represent marginalized groups.

When it comes to the design and selection of accessible technology and online platforms, researcher Parker Harris and her colleagues (2012) note that, “accessibility needs to be at the forefront of design, rather than being an afterthought”, as participants in their study reported that the accessibility of most technology is outdated. To achieve equal access to online applications and technologies, Werner et al., (2019) recommends the following practices during the design phase:

- Consider the cognitive accessibility of the technology.
- Use plain language to give greater access to complex information.
- Support educating individuals to develop technological skills.

In addition, there are international web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG) which recommend all website/ online information be:

- **perceivable** – available in multiple formats, to suit users’ requirements (e.g., non-text content is also available in text form);
- **operable** – able to be navigated by all people without causing issues (including by people who navigate pages solely through the keyboard, or who can have seizures triggered by flashing content);
- **understandable** – easy to digest, and presented according to a website design that is simple to interact with and minimise user mistakes; and
- **robust** – compatible with other technologies (e.g., assistive technology such as screen readers).

Given the various issues regarding accessibility and use of online platforms for older adults and individuals with disabilities, it is critical to fully engage your target audience in the identification of online engagement platforms, and to also beta-test platforms with them to ensure their maximum accessibility and ability to meet the goals and objectives for engaging the community.

Online Platforms and Applications for Public Participation

We may readily consider online forums and meetings, social media, surveys, and similar mechanisms for online engagement. However, it is important to recognize that there are a wide variety of platforms and apps that are specifically designed to virtually engage communities and give the opportunity to provide feedback on new initiatives. It is important to consider integrating these online platforms and applications into your online engagement efforts.

Summary

While embracing an online approach to civic engagement can be a process of trial and error, monitoring the accessibility, usefulness, and impact of the platforms used and being responsive to feedback can make all the difference in moving toward better equity and inclusion. Inequities in access and participation in civic engagement can lead to injustice when it comes to transit investments and conditions. Regardless of the online platform you choose, the most critical determinants of success are whether the process of engagement is resulting in a high level of participation fully representative of the community including older adults and people with disabilities, and whether the input gathered is reflected in transit planning decisions, actions, and outcomes.

Virtual Civic Engagement Platforms and Applications

MindMixer – for project-oriented efforts, this platform allows participants to share their ideas on city policy and development-related topics; give feedback; and comment on or “second” others’ ideas, thus promoting the most popular ideas to the top of the list.

Engaging Plans – this platform allows clients to disseminate information about projects or policies to stakeholders, as well as to collect feedback and ideas about these projects and policies from community members.

Citizen Space – particularly suited for large, complex projects, such as highway or other infrastructure engineering projects, this is a cloud-based software for managing, publicizing, and archiving all public feedback activity. This app features a topic finder with search function and a suite of online survey tools, and allows users to analyze, report, and export gathered information to Excel and SPSS.

Dialogue App – this app allows participants to submit their ideas on policies, rate and comment on other’s ideas, and share content through social media platforms. A tag function aids in the identification of themes across topics.

Crowdbrite – this platform enables online users to participate in collaborative planning and design sessions by writing comments on virtual sticky notes and then placing them on the project canvas. Submitted sticky notes appear in real time, and the Crowdbrite Mobile app allows for full functionality on mobile devices and tablets, which enables the platform to be used effectively in live meetings. Participants can use the sticky note function to upload written comments, photos, or videos, and a voting function allows users to endorse ideas. All data submitted can be used to generate reports in real time.

Ideascale – this platform compiles information and user feedback into a single online location where users can post their own ideas, comment, vote, and agree/disagree with the comments of others. It has a low cost, but provides only simple written feedback methods.

PlaceSpeak – an online community engagement and public consultation platform designed to connect people with issues affecting their local communities, which includes a geo-tagging feature that allows administrators to focus a dialogue on residents in targeted, specific neighborhoods, and helps to ensure that feedback received is from the people who will be most affected by the project or policy in question.

MetroQuest – aims to help clients create broad based support for planning initiatives and focuses on strategies for community priority-setting with four configurations for specific engagement tasks: community priorities, transportation and urban planning, funding and budget alternatives, and scenario exploration.

Textizen – enables residents who do not have internet access or smart phones to participate in online public engagement by using texting (SMS) capability available on any mobile phones to enable ongoing communication with residents through surveys, follow-up capabilities, and ongoing opt-in communication. A large number of engagement responses can be automated, and the administrator platform allows for detailed analysis and review of results.

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Transit Planning 4 All is an inclusive and coordinated transportation-planning project that has funded a series of pilot projects across the nation, each seeking to increase inclusion in transportation planning and services for people with disabilities and older adults.

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