

BINGHAMTON METROPOLITAN
TRANSPORTATION STUDY

*PARTICIPATION
PLAN*

Approved by the BMTS Policy Committee
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PARTICIPATION PLAN

The Binghamton Metropolitan Transportation Study is the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) designated by the Governor of New York under Federal law, responsible for transportation planning in the Binghamton urbanized area.

BMTS has always been committed to involving the public in the development of transportation plans and programs. As noted in our long range plan, one of BMTS' guiding principles is "We plan best when we plan with the community, not for the community". The current public participation plan is included in the BMTS Unified Operations Plan.

The current law, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act – A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) requires that MPOs develop a new public participation plan. The SAFETEA-LU requirement provides an opportunity to revisit our current plan and improve it.

“(5) Participation by interested parties.--

(A) In general.--Each metropolitan planning organization shall provide citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, private providers of transportation, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled, and other interested parties with a reasonable opportunity to comment on the transportation plan.

(B) Contents of participation plan.--A participation plan--

(i) shall be developed in consultation with all interested parties; and
(ii) shall provide that all interested parties have reasonable opportunities to comment on the contents of the transportation plan.

(C) Methods.--In carrying out subparagraph (A), the metropolitan planning organization shall, to the maximum extent practicable--

(i) hold any public meetings at convenient and accessible locations and times;
(ii) employ visualization techniques to describe plans; and
(iii) make public information available in electronically accessible format and means, such as the World Wide Web, as appropriate to afford reasonable opportunity for consideration of public information under subparagraph (A).”

SAFETEA-LU § 6001 (h) (5)

BMTS sees effective public participation in terms of a number of steps.

- ♦ The first is characterized as “getting in touch with the public”. How can we make sure that our public outreach efforts are effective in educating the public about what BMTS does, and how their input can influence our plans and programs?

- ♦ The second is opportunity for public participation. What can we do to make it easy for members of the public to provide meaningful input to our plans and program?
- ♦ The third is opportunity for stakeholder participation. What should we do to make sure the stakeholders identified in SAFETEA-LU, and others identified by BMTS, have clear access to the process?
- ♦ The final step is response and documentation. What actions should we take to make sure that the public and stakeholders know that their input was in fact considered and their participation meaningful?

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH THE PUBLIC

Discussion of public outreach implies that there is a single “public” with whom we ought to communicate about our transportation plans and programs. There are in fact many publics, each with its own interests, and its own willingness and ability to participate in transportation decisions.

People can be sorted by demographics: students have different travel needs than senior citizens; those in low-income households differ from those in upper income levels.

People can be sorted by geography: residents of a suburban town like Vestal will have different needs than those who live in downtown Binghamton.

People may be sorted by usual mode of travel: those who always travel by car will have a different perspective than those who frequently use public transit.

People differ by the position they hold in the community: a business owner, an administrator of an educational institution, and a night-shift employee will all see transportation differently.

Finally, people will differ by the impact a transportation decision has on their lives: someone whose property is directly impacted by a planned transportation project will react differently than someone who will drive through on the completed road but lives elsewhere.

The greatest challenge with respect to public participation is that most people, whatever “publics” they fit into, are typically interested in transportation only when it has a direct impact on them. While BMTS will always strive for broad public input, we recognize that the most participation will come at the project and program level. BMTS has an obligation to educate the public and stakeholder groups about what we do, and why regional transportation planning decisions have a broad impact on the citizens Greater Binghamton.

We expect to accomplish that by creating a “Citizen’s Guide to BMTS”, a tool that many other MPOs have but we do not. This guide will be widely distributed through libraries, schools, hospitals, and partner agencies. We will also consider periodic advertising to direct people to the BMTS website, rather than expect citizens to

discover it for themselves. BMTS also prepares for publication in the Binghamton Press & Sun-Bulletin newspaper on a somewhat regular basis, guest columns on transportation issues.

BMTS also recognizes that specific groups or individuals become direct stakeholders in certain decisions. For example, agencies with disabled clients may be particularly interested in decisions about the accessibility of public transit, while the Chamber of Commerce may be more attentive to the reliability of goods movement and delivery. Focused educational efforts may help those groups or individuals understand the role of BMTS and the importance of their participation in the transportation planning process.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There are specific events in the transportation planning process, like the development of the Transportation Plan or the Transportation Improvement Program, that trigger the need for public outreach. Because of the range of effectiveness of methods for the public to offer their input, BMTS provides not only opportunities for the public and stakeholders to come to us, but also seeks opportunities to reach outward.

BMTS will offer the public a variety of opportunities to participate in the metropolitan transportation planning process:

- ♦ *Provision for continuous input.* BMTS makes known through its web site (www.bmtsonline.com) that comments and concerns regarding transportation in the metropolitan area are always accepted. When there are specific planning documents on which comment is sought, like a Draft Transportation Improvement Program, that will be highlighted. The web site has a feedback link, as well as providing e-mail, postal address, and telephone contact information. The Citizen's Guide to BMTS will also make clear that input is always welcomed.
- ♦ *BMTS Meetings.* All meetings of the BMTS Policy Committee, Planning Committee, and subcommittees are open to the public. An opportunity for public comment is included on the agenda of each meeting. Meetings are publicized through press releases to the local electronic and print media, as well as posting on the BMTS web site. Meetings are held in government buildings that are accessible to all individuals, including those with mobility impairments. These locations are also accessible by public transit.
- ♦ *Public Forums.* BMTS conducts public meetings in relation to development of the Transportation Plan, the Transportation Improvement Program, and other tasks in the Unified Planning Work Program, ranging from corridor studies to greenway plans. BMTS cooperates with the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) in the planning and conduct of public information meetings for their metropolitan area projects. BMTS also assists local government sponsors of Federal aid projects in the conduct of project level public outreach, including public information meetings on project phases ranging from initial scoping to design.

These meetings are always held in locations that are accessible to all individuals, including those with mobility impairments. These locations are also accessible by public transit.

Meetings conducted by BMTS are always held both in the daytime and evening in order to accommodate the varying schedule demands of members of the public. BMTS encourages our partners to do the same.

- ♦ *Outreach by BMTS Staff.* BMTS also seeks appropriate opportunities to participate in meetings or events scheduled by others. For example, we have made presentations at events of the Broome County Office for Aging, and meetings of the Greater Binghamton Chamber of Commerce. We have extended our outreach by presenting in local public school classes.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

As noted above, there are institutions and organizations that have a specific stake in the transportation planning process, sometimes broadly and others more focused. Who are stakeholders in the BMTS planning process?

SAFETEA-LU defines:

- ♦ Affected public agencies
- ♦ Representatives of public transportation employees
- ♦ Freight shippers
- ♦ Providers of freight transportation services
- ♦ Private providers of transportation
- ♦ Representatives of users of public transportation
- ♦ Representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities
- ♦ Representatives of the disabled
- ♦ Agencies responsible for safety and security operations
- ♦ Representatives of the traditionally underserved, including low income and minority populations

BMTS also considers:

- ♦ Representatives of the elderly
- ♦ Local businesses
- ♦ Local educational institutions
- ♦ Representatives of organizations advocating for motorists

There are a variety of means of obtaining input from stakeholders, ranging from direct contact to advisory committees. For example, BMTS maintains a Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee that meets regularly, and provides feedback from that stakeholder group. Conversely, a Freight Advisory Committee was initiated during the conduct of a rail freight plan, but dissolved later because there was no real basis for ongoing meetings. Sometimes BMTS participates in activities of the stakeholders, including the Chamber of Commerce's Transportation Committee and a planning task force of the Broome County Office for Aging.

Direct communication is the most common and most effective means of involving stakeholders in BMTS activities. BMTS maintains contact lists for each of the

stakeholder groups, and sends letters and/or e-mail communication when there is a plan or program germane to that area.

MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

BMTS recognizes that effective outreach must rely on a variety of communication tools. We cannot expect members of the public, or even many of the stakeholder groups to read reports that are filled with technical jargon, directed toward members of the transportation engineering and planning discipline. BMTS is committed to making sure that outreach documents are written in plain language.

SAFETEA-LU requires that visualization be used as a method of communicating with the public and stakeholders. This covers a wide range of techniques, from maps to computer simulation that provides the viewer a three dimensional perspective of a future project. Such tools are and will remain part of BMTS' approach to effective outreach.

RESPONSE AND DOCUMENTATION

Effective public outreach does not stop once input has been received from either the general public or stakeholders. Effective participation requires that those providing input receive a response, and are assured that their comments have been heard and seriously considered. It is not sufficient to conclude a public meeting by simply acknowledging those in attendance; nor to send a pro forma "thank you for your message" reply to written or electronic comments. People are very easily discouraged if they believe their input has not been seriously considered, and will be less likely to participate in the future.

BMTS is committed to acknowledging all comments within five working days of receipt, whether from a public meeting, through the BMTS website, by e-mail or surface mail, as long as the commenter has provided contact information. The acknowledgement will provide information on how the substance of the comment was considered.

BMTS is awaiting additional Federal guidance on this issue, but will consider in future Transportation Plan and Transportation Improvement Program updates including an appendix with substantive comments received, and responses given.

SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENT TIMELINES

The Transportation Plan and Transportation Improvement Program carry with them specific timelines that govern opportunity for public comment.

Transportation Plan

Federal law requires that BMTS maintain a regional transportation plan with a horizon of at least twenty years, and that the plan be updated at least every five years. As an update cycle is initiated, the following timelines will apply:

- Each update of the Transportation Plan will begin with a public outreach effort. This effort will include media notification, use of the BMTS website, and public meeting(s). The purpose of the media notification and the meetings is to

provide information about the planning process and to seek input about what the public and stakeholders identify as significant transportation issues that should be addressed in the plan. Both oral and written comment will be encouraged.

- Prior to drafting any documents, outreach will be conducted to provide an opportunity for the public and stakeholders to engage in discussions of the goals, objectives, and general direction of the Plan.
- As Transportation Plan documents are produced, they will be made available for review and comment in draft form. They will be distributed to the public involvement participants by mail and on the BMTS website. The public will be notified through the media that the documents are available for review at the BMTS and NYSDOT offices. There will be a 30 day comment period.
- All comments will be considered and addressed before the documents are brought for BMTS Policy Committee approval.

Transportation Improvement Program

The Transportation Improvement Program lists projects in the metropolitan area that will be funded under programs of the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration. It is a five year program, and is updated every two years, in concert with NYSDOT's capital program update. These timelines will apply:

- TIP development: during the data collection and project identification phase, notify the public involvement participants by mail and use of the BMTS website, requesting input on the identification of projects and priorities.
- Based on the BMTS Policy on Project Programming, develop Pre-Draft TIP.
- Upon approval of the Pre-Draft TIP by the TIP Subcommittee, distribute to public involvement participants by mail and use of the BMTS website; make copies available to the general public at BMTS and NYSDOT offices; notify media; 30 day comment period.
- Comments are considered and addressed; Draft TIP is prepared, submitted to Planning Committee.
- Upon approval of Draft TIP by Planning Committee, make copies available to the general public at BMTS and NYSDOT offices and on the BMTS website; notify media; 30 day comment period.
- Comments are considered and addressed; TIP is submitted to Policy Committee for final action.

CONSULTATION

SAFETEA-LU also requires that BMTS consult with other planning agencies and officials in the development of the Transportation Plan:

The Secretary shall encourage each metropolitan planning organization to consult with officials responsible for other types of planning activities that are affected by transportation in the area (including State and local planned growth, economic development, environmental protection, airport operations, and freight movements) or to coordinate its planning process, to the maximum extent practicable, with such planning activities.

SAFETEA-LU, §6001(g)3)

BMTS staff as a matter of course works with local planning agencies. Staff is physically housed in the Broome County Planning Department. Agencies included under this requirement also include:

- ♦ New York State DOT*
- ♦ New York State Dept of State
- ♦ New York State Dept of Environmental Conservation
- ♦ Broome County Dept of Planning and Economic Development*
- ♦ Tioga County Dept of Economic Development and Planning*
- ♦ Broome County Industrial Development Agency
- ♦ Broome County Dept of Aviation*
- ♦ City of Binghamton Dept of Planning, Housing, and Community Development*
- ♦ Village of Johnson City Planning Dept*
- ♦ Town of Union Planning Dept
- ♦ Town of Owego Planning Dept*

* These agencies are directly represented on the BMTS Planning Committee

These agencies will be directly involved in a high level of communication during all stages of the development of the Transportation Plan.