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# *Public Participation Plan*

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**RURAL PLANNING ORGANIZATION**

**2022**

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# INTRODUCTION

The Pee Dee Regional Council of Governments (PDRCOG) is one of ten regional planning organizations that cover rural portions of South Carolina and help manage transportation issues. The organization covers six counties: Chesterfield, Darlington, Dillon, Florence, Marion, and Marlboro.

The jurisdiction of the PDRCOG does not include the urban territory managed by the Florence Area Transportation Study (FLATS) area (portions of Florence and Darlington Counties).

The PDRCOG is responsible for directing federal transportation funds to local transportation activities within its six-county jurisdiction. It is considered a Rural Planning Organization (RPO), in contrast to FLATS, a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), adopted in 1998, and Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), enacted on August 10, 2005, are the current laws mandating transportation planning. This Public Participation Process is a requirement under Title 23, Code of Federal Regulations Part 450.

The PDRCOG transportation planning area dominates northeastern South Carolina, covering all of the above six counties except the Florence urban area, which includes the municipalities of Darlington, Florence, Quinby, and Timmons ville. This planning area is illustrated below and encompasses 37 municipalities:

## CHESTERFIELD

- Cheraw
- Chesterfield
- Jefferson
- McBee
- Mount Croghan
- Pageland
- Patrick
- Ruby

## DARLINGTON

- Darlington
- Hartsville
- Lamar
- Society Hill

## DILLON

- Dillon
- Lake View
- Latta

## FLORENCE

- Coward
- Florence
- Johnsonville
- Lake City
- Olanta
- Pamplico
- Quinby
- Scranton
- Timmons ville

## MARION

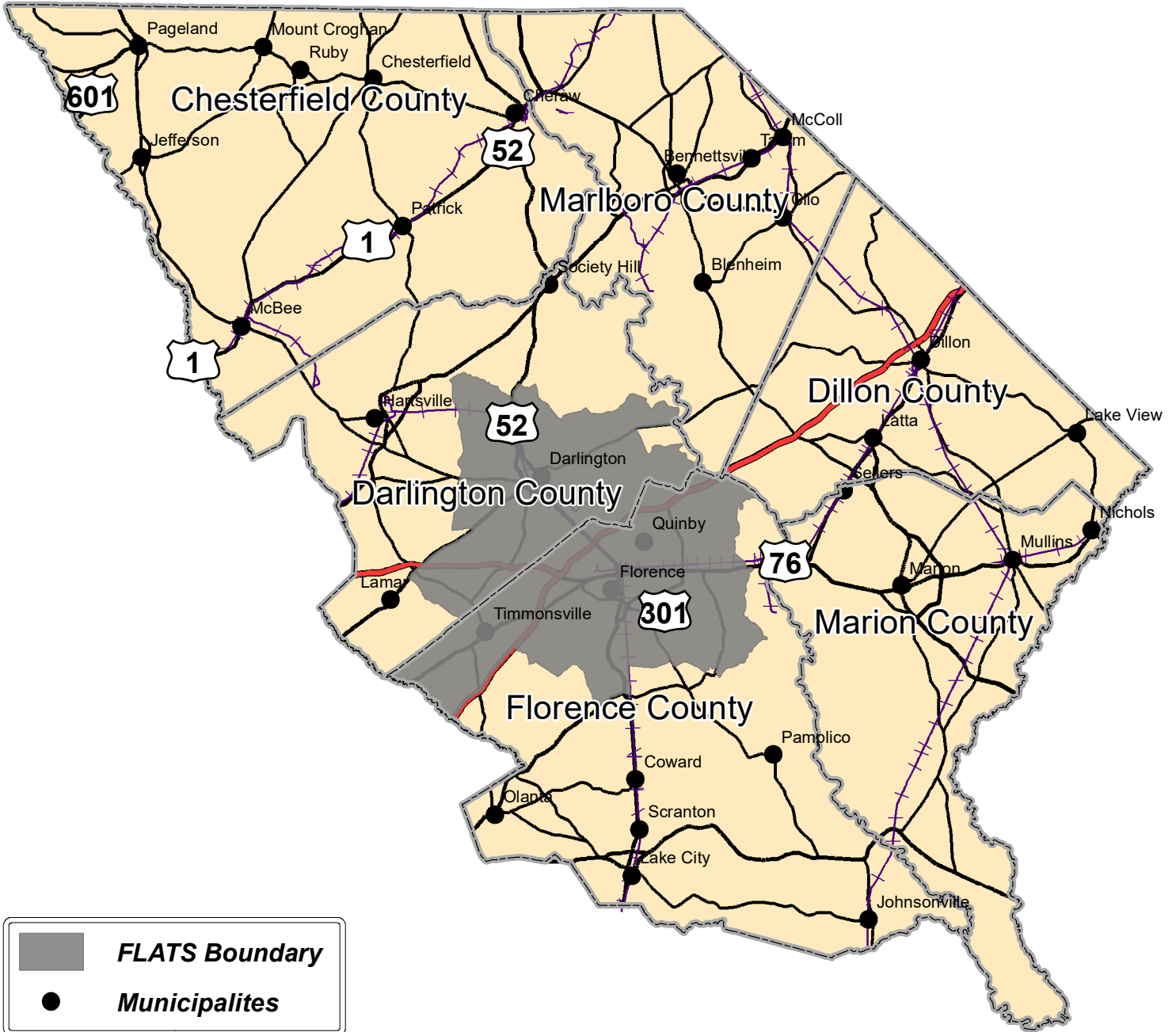
- Marion
- Mullins
- Nichols
- Sellers



## MARLBORO

- Bennettsville
- Blenheim
- Clio
- McColl
- Tatum



# Pee Dee Regional Map



	<b>FLATS Boundary</b>
	<b>Municipalities</b>



Reasonable efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of these maps. The Pee Dee Regional Council of Governments expressly disclaims responsibility for damages or liability that may arise from the use of these maps. April 2022

# PURPOSE

The Pee Dee Region has both rural and urban areas, with an extensive network of roadways serving the social and economic mobility needs of the region's residents, businesses, and institutions. In recent years, transportation planning in the region has focused on connectivity issues, insuring consistent and quality connections between communities, as well as improving overcrowded roadways and correcting safety issues. And, more emphasis is now placed on public transit, filling the transportation gap for those residents who do not have access to vehicles.

In accordance with its long-standing practice to be open with the public regarding all issues and programs, the COG's transportation public participation process is intended to provide a two-way process of information and idea-sharing with the public and directly affected communities. To that end, this process will:

- Provide information to the public (residents and the business community alike) on the decision-making process.
- Provide complete and timely information to the public, business community, transportation providers (including freight-haulers) on transportation issues and problems, the regional Long-Range Plan (LRP) and proposed projects programmed in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).
- Inform the public of alternative means of solving transportation problems.
- Inform all sectors of the public are informed of these issues, and that all stakeholder groups are engaged in the process at various times.
- Provide meaningful forums for public comment on transportation problems and solutions and ensure concerns regarding specific impacts of proposed activities are known to the regional policymaking body.
- Consider the needs of those under-served by existing transportation systems, including but not limited to the transportation disadvantaged, minorities, elderly, persons with disabilities, and low-income households. In addition, transportation agencies and organizations, freight-haulers, users of public transportation, and representatives of pedestrian and bicycle users will be able to offer input regarding needs and facilities.
- Address public comments in the decision-making process. All comments will be carefully and deliberately considered. How comments have been addressed will be made available to the public.
- Maintain a list of potential stakeholders in the transportation planning process.

While the above purposes relate to two-way communication of issues with the traveling public, residents, the business community, freight shippers; and others, there are programmatic reasons for a formal and inclusive public participation plan. Most notably, requirements of the Federal Highway Administration (FHA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) as well as the SC Department of Transportation (SCDOT) public participation.

The above purposes will be fulfilled by a philosophical attitude by COG staff which wishes to understand public sentiment and by the implementation of specific means of involving the public to:

- Respond to all reasonable comments on the needs of the region, and concerns regarding impacts, etc.
- Use reasonable, early, and on-going communication with those communities and groups likely to be most impacted by projects.
- Uses a variety of communication techniques (website, email, public workshops, small working sessions, one-on-one discussions, newspaper and radio communication, written

reports, and documents, etc.) which will reach the greatest number of people and solicit the best public discourse; and,

- Attempt to consider language and cultural differences in the solicitation and assessment of public comment.

# COG REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION PLANNING BACKGROUND

The PDRCOG, along with nine other COGs across the State, established a continuing, comprehensive, and cooperative transportation planning process as a Rural Planning Organization (RPO) in 1997 through a cooperative agreement with the SC Department of Transportation. The COG maintains this transportation planning program to meet appropriate federal and state requirements related to the development of a safe, effective, efficient, and environmentally sensitive multi-modal transportation system for moving people and goods in the region. The RPO planning process also considers statewide transportation initiatives and those of surrounding regions.

The public participation process described here calls for two committees to guide RPO activities: an Executive Committee that contains voting membership and has final local approval and authority on all major transportation decisions, policies, and programs; and, the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC), which provides recommendations to the Executive Committee on those inputs used in the development of transportation plans and programs.

This Public Participation Process is intended to provide direction for public involvement activities to be conducted by the RPO and contains the goals and objectives described below, intended to ensure meaningful public dialogue.

# GOALS AND OBJECTIVES FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Remembering the purpose and intent of its transportation planning effort and the value of public participation, the COG has established the following broad goal and specific objectives to guide the process:

**Goal:** To efficiently and effectively interest, inform and involve the public in the regional transportation planning process, encouraging, and accommodating their meaningful participation and input.

**Objective 1:** The RPO will encourage the involvement of all area citizens in the transportation planning process by:

- Seeking out under-involved populations within the region, including minority, low income, senior citizen, and immobile populations.
- Targeting different audiences for each planning task, as necessary, including residents, business interests, transit providers, freight-haulers, and underserved and underrepresented populations.
- Holding public meetings at sites convenient to potentially affected citizens and promoting meetings in a manner appropriate to the population groups from which feedback is desired.

**Objective 2:** The RPO will actively engage the public in the transportation planning process according to the policies contained in this public participation process as well as State and Federal Law.

- The RPO will maintain an up-to-date database of all interested parties that have reasonable interest in transportation issues and need opportunities to comment on the transportation planning process and products. Such a list will include:
  - Elected Officials & Local Government Staff
  - Transportation Agencies (Port, Airports, Transit, etc.)
  - Local Print Media
  - Civic & Special Interest Groups
  - Libraries
  - The COG
  - Federal, State, and local land use management, natural resources, environmental protection, conservation, historic preservation, and other environmental agencies
  - Public and private environmental organizations
  - Native American Tribal Councils
  - Private Freight Shippers
  - Representatives of Public Transportation Employees
  - Public transportation providers, including PDRTA and social service transportation providers
  - Private Providers of Transportation
  - Representatives of Users of Public Transportation, Pedestrians, and Bicycle
  - Representatives of the Disabled
  - Other interests as may from time-to-time be active and interested in the planning and development of the transportation network and/or the environment.
- The COG will, when feasible, electronically mail meeting announcements to the contact list or to targeted groups for upcoming activities.

**Objective 3:** The COG will keep the public informed of on-going transportation related activities on a continuous basis, using a variety of written and graphic means.

- The COG will employ visual techniques to depict transportation conditions and plans, including charts, graphs, photo interpretation, maps, GIS, and/or computer simulation.
- The COG will make all publications and work products available electronically to the public via the COG web page (<https://peedeecog.org>) and at COG offices. The website will be compliant with Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act for disabled users. The website shall be updated and maintained to provide the most current and accurate transportation planning information available. The website will, at a minimum, contain the following information:
  - o Contact information (mailing address, phone, fax, and e-mail)
  - o Current COG transportation committee membership
  - o Meeting calendars and agendas
  - o Work products and publications (Transportation Improvement Program, Long Range Transportation Plans, Unified Planning Work Program,
  - o Operating Procedures (including the Public Participation Plan and updates)
- The COG staff will be reasonably available to provide general and project-specific information at a central location during normal business hours and after hours at the request of community interest groups with reasonable notice.

**Objective 4:** The COG will strive to continuously improve public participation and will revise this Plan and participation mechanisms as necessary to make them most effective.

- This Public Participation Plan will be reviewed and adopted, with revisions, if necessary, at least every five (5) years to improve the effectiveness of public involvement.

**Objective 5:** The COG will participate in public participation activities for individual transportation improvement projects from the planning phase through construction.

- The COG will actively assist the SCDOT, local governments and transportation agencies in the development and implementation of public involvement techniques for planning and other studies, including Feasibility Studies, Project Development and Environmental Studies.

**Objective 6:** The COG will maintain a Title VI Program including procedures to report unfair treatment of groups based on race, color, and national origin.

- The COG will maintain a log of Title VI complaints and forward to appropriate State and Federal agencies for review and guidance.



# PUBLIC PARTICIPATION TECHNIQUES

Public participation is an ongoing activity of the COG. Public participation is also an integral part of one-time activities such as corridor studies and regularly repeated activities such as the annual Transportation Improvement Program process and Long-Range Transportation Plan updates.

This section contains descriptions of public participation tools currently being used and others by the COG:

## **COG Website**

*Description:* The website is established to provide basic information about the COG process, members, meeting times and contact information. Work products, such as the drafted, and adopted Public Participation Plan, Unified Planning Work Program, Transportation Improvement Program and Long-Range Transportation Plan are available on the site.

The website address is <https://peedeecog.org>. The website is maintained by the Pee Dee COG staff and regularly updated.

*Activities:* The website is used to list current and topical information on regular and special meetings, planning studies, publications, related public events, and work products.

## **COG Stake Holders**

*Description:* COG staff maintains a database of federal, state, and local agencies. The database includes committee membership, mailing information, phone numbers, fax numbers, e-mail addresses and websites. The database will be used to establish and maintain a list of e-mail contacts for electronic meeting notification and announcements.

*Activities:* The database is used to enhance public involvement activities.

## **Legal Advertised Notices**

*Description:* All notices of meetings and hearings of the COG Transportation Policy Committee shall be posted pursuant to the *South Carolina Open Public Meetings Act*. Notices shall be published a minimum of seven (7) days prior to the meeting. The mailing and/or e-mailing of notices and press releases should be timed to be received locally within five (5) days of the meeting.

When official public hearings and public comment periods for regional plans and programs are provided, said meeting notices shall be published a minimum of ten (10) days prior to adoption in *The Morning News*. All notices of sub-regional plans and programs funded by the COG shall be made in the newspaper of greatest circulation in the study area.

The COG committee shall consider hosting special meetings when needed to consider a special non-routine item necessitating action but falls between regularly scheduled meetings. If a special meeting is called, the notice shall be published a minimum of three (3) days prior the meeting.

*Activities:* Regular and other meetings seeking public input are posted ten (10) days prior to the meeting.

## **Display Ads**

*Description:* The COG may publish ads used to promote meetings not regularly scheduled, such as corridor study workshops. They are published in selected newspapers to reach a larger audience than typically read legal notices.

*Activities:* Public awareness of project specific meetings, workshops, or open houses.

## **Direct Mailings**

*Description:* Used to announce upcoming meetings or activities or to provide information to a targeted area or group of people. Direct mailings are usually letters but can be postcards or flyers. An area may be targeted for a direct mailing because of potential impacts from a project. Groups are targeted which may have an interest in a specific issue, for example avid cyclists and pedestrians may be targeted for pathways and trail projects.

*Activities:* Project-specific meetings, workshops, open houses, corridor studies, small area studies, other planning studies or major activities.

## **Press Releases**

*Description:* Formal press releases are sent to *The Morning News* to announce upcoming meetings and activities and to provide information on specific issues being considered by the COG or their committees. When specific communities are affected by transportation plans, then local newsletters and media will be sought to communicate the project status.

*Activities:* Corridor or other planning studies, workshops, open houses, public hearings, and other COG activities.

## **Targeted Public Meetings**

*Description:* Targeted public meetings are generally open and informal, with project team members interacting with the public on a one-on-one basis. Short presentations may be given at these meetings. The purpose of project-specific meetings is to provide project information to the public and to solicit public comment and a sense of public priorities.

*Activities:* Long-range planning studies, corridor studies, and other major COG activities.

## **Public Hearings**

*Description:* Public meetings are used to solicit public comment on a project or issue being considered for adoption by the COG. Hearings provide a formal setting for citizens to provide comments to the COG or other decision-making body. Meeting minutes are taken and maintained. In addition, interpreters may be made available who communicate in additional languages as required.

The COG may also choice to hold public hearings in the form of a virtual meeting. If a public hearing is held in this format, along with the standard meeting requirements, additional effort should be made to ensure members of the public and committee members are able to readily access the meeting. These efforts should include, but are not limited to, the following steps:

- 1) All public announcements for the meeting should indicate the meeting will be held virtually, and a link to where people can register and/or join the meeting.
- 2) A link to register and/or join the meeting should be accessible on the PDCOG webpage.
- 3) A phone number should also be made available on the PDCOG webpage for citizens to call if they experience problems while attempting to log into the meeting. This phone line should be manned by someone who can assist them with joining the meeting.

- 4) Staff should make themselves available prior to the meeting date for members of the public and committee members, who may require a walk-thru/test meeting on how to join the meeting and for those who wish to ensure the electronic device with which they plan to join the meeting is compatible.
- 5) When a virtual meeting is being conducted, a call-in number must also be available for those who request to participate in the meeting but do not have access to internet.

The goal of a virtual meeting should be to make the meeting process not only more convenient, but to also make the meeting process more readily available and practical for members of the public, and committee members to participate.

*Activities:* Long Range Transportation Plans, Transportation Improvement Program, corridor studies, Project Development & Environmental studies, and other planning studies as needed for other COG activities.

### **Comment Forms / Complaint Procedure**

*Description:* Comment forms are often used to solicit public comment on specific issues being presented at a workshop, other public meetings or accompany documents made available for public review. Comment forms can be very general in nature or can ask for very specific feedback. For example, a comment form may ask for comments on specific alignment alternatives being considered during a corridor study or may ask for a person's general feelings about any aspect of transportation. Comment forms can also be included in publications and on websites to solicit input regarding the subject of the publication and/or the format of the publication or website.

In alignment with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, these comment opportunities allow for complaints associated with minority groups as described in Title VI of the U.S. Code (42 U.S.C. § 2000d et seq.). Such complaints will be logged in at the COG office. Title VI complaints may be e-mailed, mailed by post, or communicated directly by calling or visiting the COG office. This information is shown on the cover of this document.

*Activities:* Public workshops, open houses, hearings, and other meetings, COG documents on public display, and general COG activities.

### **Surveys**

*Description:* Surveys are used when very specific input from the public is desired. A survey can be used in place of comment cards to ask very specific questions such as to whether a person supports a specific alignment in a corridor study. Surveys are also used to gather technical data during corridor and planning studies. For example, participants may be asked about their daily travel patterns.

*Activities:* Conduct on-line surveys on issues and needs to provide input into the plans.

### **Posters and Flyers**

*Description:* Posters and flyers are used to announce meetings and events and are distributed to public places such as City/Town Halls, libraries, and community centers for display. The announcement may contain a brief description of the purpose of a meeting, the time(s) and location(s), and contact information. Posters and flyers may be used to reach a large audience which may not be reached using direct mailings and/or newsletters.

*Activities:* Corridor studies, small-area studies, other planning studies, regular and special COG activities

# COMMENT PERIOD TABLES

## PUBLIC DOCUMENT REVIEW, COMMENT, AND APPROVAL POLICIES

Program Adoption	Public Meetings	Comment Period	Accessibility
Public Participation Plan	As requested	21 Days	Internet & PDCOG Office
Other DOT Required Plans, Programs, or Processes where Policy Committee Approval is Needed	As requested	21 Days or Minimum required by SCDOT	Internet & PDCOG Office
Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)	As requested	30 Days	Internet & PDCOG Office
Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)	As requested	21 Days	Internet & PDCOG Office

## PUBLIC DOCUMENT AMENDMENT REVIEW, COMMENT, AND APPROVAL POLICIES

Program Adoption	Public Meetings	Comment Period	Accessibility
Public Participation Plan	As requested	21 Days	Internet & PDCOG Office
Other DOT Required Plans, Programs, or Processes where Policy Committee Approval is Needed	As requested	21 Days or Minimum required by SCDOT	Internet & PDCOG Office
Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)	As requested	30 Days	Internet & PDCOG Office
Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)	As requested	21 Days	Internet & PDCOG Office

# EVALUATION OF METHODS

PDCOG continually strives for improved public participation. Improvements should be made to increase public awareness and to improve the quantity and quality of information provided to the public. The decisions made by PDCOG affect both residents and visitors. Therefore, seeking public input on those decisions is vital to the success of rural transportation planning. To evaluate the effectiveness of the public participation tools, both a quantitative assessment of the number of participants, as well as a qualitative assessment of the level of interaction and information exchanged are necessary.

PDCOG will monitor public participation through various means, including:

- Taking attendance at public outreach meetings using a sign-in sheet.
- Keeping a log of contacts with the public, via phone, mail, email, in-person meetings, or other means, which resulted from a public outreach activity.
- Keeping a record of attendance and involvement at PDCOG events.
- Tracking the number of completed surveys or comment cards received from a public outreach event.
- Tracking distribution of public information materials, including newsletters, and other publications.
- Tracking number of addresses on mailing lists; and
- Other means appropriate for the type of public outreach used.