

INCLUSIVE & ACCESSIBLE VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

GPCOG
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COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Public engagement is vital to the decision-making process. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic – and the required physical distancing – virtual spaces and tools are increasingly being utilized for the public participation process. While virtual tools help eliminate mobility and time barriers, their use can create other obstacles that lead to exclusion of older adults, people with disabilities, people with limited English proficiency and those with limited access to technology. These obstacles must be considered and addressed to ensure we maximize engagement of the most vulnerable among us in the decisions that affect their lives.

In April 2020, the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG), like government entities across the country, was forced to move all of its business to virtual spaces. While we expect a return to in-person meetings and outreach in the future, GPCOG wants to ensure that in the interim, our engagement is as inclusive and accessible as possible. It is critical to note that virtual engagement should include online and digital approaches, but also includes other, non-electronic ways of engaging people who are not physically gathered. The decision to use digital or non-digital tools is dependent upon the nature of each project and audience. Looking ahead to the return to in-person engagement, GPCOG hopes to continue offering virtual options. Doing so will enable GPCOG to engage a broader audience and enhance access and inclusion for those who cannot get to the “table.”

To better understand how organizations have pivoted their programming to a virtual platform while maintaining their commitment to equitable public engagement, GPCOG conducted research on best practices for inclusive and accessible virtual engagement. The study included interviews with Maine-based stakeholder groups that serve historically underrepresented communities, an assessment of tools and platforms for online engagement, and a scan of reports, websites, and literature on best practices for equitable virtual engagement.

This report seeks to:

- Provide an overview of best practices for using virtual engagement in a way that is accessible, inclusive, and equitable.
- Share tips and resources for GPCOG members and other stakeholders on how to virtually engage the public using various online tools and platforms.
- Assist GPCOG and other organizations with institutionalizing equitable virtual engagement practices.

II. BEST PRACTICES

Virtual Engagement uses digital tools and other techniques to find, listen to, and sometimes mobilize community members around an issue. When virtual engagement is equitable, it has the power to inclusively shape public opinion and policy. While utilizing virtual spaces for collaborative engagement and outreach have been around for decades, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced organizations to 'go virtual' on an unprecedented scale. As a result, organizations are learning how to use a wide range of digital formats and virtual tools to connect and engage with their communities. Based on the research conducted by GPCOG, six themes emerged as best practices for successfully designing and implementing accessible, inclusive, and equitable virtual engagement programs.

A. Define engagement goals and objectives.

Whether developing a virtual public participation plan or planning for a virtual meeting, clearly identifying your engagement goals can help structure the virtual engagement program or activity. Clearly defining the goals and objectives prior to the implementation will inform which methods, strategies, tools, and accommodations needed for successful virtual engagement.

Select the Right Level of Participation

Determining the level of public participation can clarify the role of the public in planning and decision-making. A simple tool to assist in the selection of the appropriate level of public participation is the [International Association of Public Participation \(IAP2\)](#) Public Participation Spectrum. The Public Participation Spectrum is designed to aid in assessing the engagement goals that should be considered when designing a public participation program. For instance, if project decisions have already been made, be clear that your goal is only to inform the public.

Digital vs Virtual Tools

Digital tools are programs, websites or online resources that can make tasks easier to complete. A lot of these can be accessed in web browsers without needing to be downloaded. They can also be used across different devices, making it easy to access from work, home, and other settings (e.g. Twitter, Google Drive, Dropbox, MindMup). Virtual tools are a broader category of strategies and approaches that enable engagement without being in-person. Virtual tools include phone calls, mailings, and other means of engaging people who do not have Internet access.

Inclusive Transportation Planning Toolkit

Framing what inclusiveness in an organization looks like and how to institutionalize those principles into programming is fundamental in creating an equitable engagement process. In 2019, GPCOG and PACTS (the Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation System) partnered with Catalyst Collaboratives to develop an [Inclusive Transportation Planning Toolkit](#). The development of this toolkit was initiated to ensure that PACTS decision-making involves older adults, people with disabilities, and people of color, people with low incomes and other underrepresented communities - who have traditionally lacked representation in mainstream planning processes.

iap2 public participation spectrum

developed by the international association for public participation

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advise and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
EXAMPLE TOOLS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact sheets • Websites • Open houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public comment • Focus groups • Surveys • Public meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops • Deliberate polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen Advisory committees • Consensus-building • Participatory decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen juries • Ballots • Delegated decisions

B. Know the communities you serve and understand what engagement barriers they face.

Understanding the community history and identifying structural barriers to civic participation is the foundation to engaging the broader public and hard-to-reach communities. By identifying barriers specific to the virtual context, those barriers can be explicitly addressed to ensure meaningful public engagement.

In designing a virtual public engagement plan specific to your community, consider the following:

- What barriers to access does your community face? (e.g. Lack of access to a broadband internet connection? Language or cultural barriers? Need for assistive technologies?)
- Does your audience know how to navigate through the virtual platform? (i.e. do they have the skills to properly use the software platform/digital tools?)
- What social and organizational networks exist in the community that can potentially be leveraged for outreach?
- What strategies have been used in the past and what were the outcomes?

C. Meet people where they are.

Meeting the community where they are and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate are pillars of equitable virtual engagement. An important aspect of meeting people where they are is understanding which virtual engagement tools will be the most effective in your community. To select the appropriate tool(s) to match the engagement goals or objectives, consider:

- The number of people who are able and willing to participate.
- The ability of the tools to accommodate different levels, types, or formats of participation.
- The deployment of the tools on various devices such as cell phones, laptops, and iPads.
- Existing utilization of the tools within the community (i.e. is the tool or platform already widely used in the community?)
- Cost.
- Compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the capacity of the tools to integrate with assistive technologies such as captioning and screen readers.

D. Design an inclusive virtual engagement plan.

Different people will experience different barriers depending on various factors. In planning for equitable virtual engagement, understanding the culture of the community and the barriers they face will inform the development of the virtual engagement plan.

To ensure the inclusion of as many people as you can in your virtual engagement plan or meeting, consider the following strategies:

- Begin meetings with a statement that centers diversity, equity, and inclusion and how they align with your organization's values. This can include an invitation for people to speak slowly and clearly and say their name each time they participate. Doing so will encourage a shared understanding for how different needs will be accommodated to ensure participation.
- Recognize that people may be facing personal challenges that hinder willingness to participate in specific projects. At this moment, COVID-19 is impacting participation, but health issues and economic challenges are perennial.
- Ensure that information can be made available on different devices and formats.
- Allow communities to participate in the process through different means and platforms (combination of online tools and phone-in options).

PACTS Civil Rights/Title VI Plan

Conducting an analysis of your community and what barriers they face will better allow for inclusive virtual engagement, particularly among those voices that have traditionally been excluded. PACTS, the metropolitan planning organization for the Greater Portland area, maintains a [Civil Rights/Title VI Plan](#) in compliance with federal mandates. The plan includes a mapping and data analysis of protected population groups who experience barriers to transportation access in the PACTS region. The PACTS region is comprised of 18 cities and towns in Southern Maine. This mapping is used to evaluate the equitable distribution of transportation benefits and assess disparate negative impacts. The mapping is also used to determine whether there is equitable distribution of services, facilities, and resources within the PACTS region.

- Check in with participants to determine whether they will need special accommodations.
- Foster inclusion through the use of best practices facilitation. In other words, create a space that encourages people to share input and provide opportunities for various forms of participation.
- Ensure that the presentation and supplemental materials are available after the meeting, and when appropriate, in different languages.
- Make information easy to understand and break down into small segments.
- Build a high level of flexibility, be ready to learn and constantly adjust.

E. Work with partner organizations in the field.

Partnering with trusted local organizations is one of the most important strategies for reaching underrepresented groups. In developing any public virtual engagement plan, community partners should be included in planning engagement efforts. When appropriate, partners should be financially compensated for their efforts. Good practice includes asking whether compensation would be helpful. Furthermore, the partner organizations should be rooted in the community and their membership and staff should be representative of groups you seek to reach virtually.

Building long-term relationships with local community organizations develops trust and establishes a communication line between your agency and vulnerable populations that are unlikely to participate in the mainstream public engagement process. By connecting and partnering with other organizations that serve your community, a network can be created that will eliminate gaps or reduce redundancies that can stifle meaningful public engagement.

F. Train staff, meeting moderators and facilitators.

Good moderators and facilitators are invaluable to ensure that different voices are being heard and perspectives considered during virtual meetings and outreach. Regardless of the platform, moderators must be good listeners, work collaboratively with the community, and understand how to positively synthesize ideas, strategies, and actions to meet the needs of the community.

In conducting a virtual meeting or virtual engagement activity, moderators/facilitators should:

- **Conduct a health and safety check.** Give people the opportunity to share their current status and feelings if in a smaller group. It is important to acknowledge challenges, losses, and current struggles of people and let them know that you are listening.
- **Explain virtual meeting rules.** Clear and transparent communication can help set the tone and structure of a virtual meeting. It is helpful to:
 - Clearly explain the purpose of the meeting and how the information will be used.
 - Acknowledge the use of unfamiliar technology and let participants know the rules and etiquette of the meeting, such as: How to identify themselves, mute the device, “raise their hand” to speak – especially for those who are calling in.
 - Explain how everyone can participate in the meeting and identify ways they can communicate, how their communications will be addressed, and when.
- **Facilitate an engaging meeting.** Effective facilitation of a virtual meeting can often feel overwhelming. To alleviate stress, assign another person the role of “producer.” The

producer will manage the technical side of things, monitor the chat box, and ensure that the audio is clear, and that the audience can view what is being posted.

- **Understand the digital barriers different audiences face.** Whether your audience is unfamiliar with the software or face broadband and connectivity issues, being aware of these challenges helps in navigating the virtual space or knowing when to reach out using different means.
- **Utilize a dedicated email and phone line for taking public comments.** This ensures questions and comments reach the facilitator in a timely fashion.
- **Master security features.** When engaging in a virtual space, it is important that participants feel secure. Moderators/Facilitators should be trained on how to manage unexpected situations and how to integrate precautionary security measures prior to the meeting or virtual event.

III. ADDRESSING COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT NEEDS

As meetings and events take place in virtual spaces as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, accessibility is too often an afterthought. And yet, for many members of our communities, accessibility is the difference between inclusion and exclusion. When virtual platforms are not carefully selected with [accessibility](#) and inclusion in mind, they exclude a significant number of potential users from being fully involved and engaged in an internet-dependent world. GPCOG conducted interviews with staff from a range of Maine-based organizations that work directly with older adults, people with disabilities, and other historically underrepresented communities with the hope of identifying some best practices. Below are best practices and insights gleaned from those interviews (See Appendix A).

A. Older Adult Populations

With one-fifth of Maine's population consisting of adults aged 65 or older, capturing the voices of older adults is important to ensure that the needs of this key population are considered. What's more, when older adults are part of the public engagement process, the whole community benefits from the "age-friendly" approaches that result. While many older adults are online – it is estimated that 40% of older adults use social media in the United States in 2019 (Statista 2020) – some still rely on traditional forms of communication. This includes mail, printed materials, and phone calls.

Case Study: Southern Maine Agency on Aging

The Southern Maine Agency on Aging's mission is to improve quality of life for older adults, adults with disabilities, and the people who care for them. As a response to the COVID-19 crisis, the agency created "Welcome to ZOOM" tutorials to help older adults become more familiar with the now popular ZOOM platform. In addition to these trainings, the agency integrated both digital and non-digital tools to better reach their communities. For instance, they used print media and mailings to keep their community updated with news.

Tips and Best Practices:

- Avoid stereotyping older adults. Despite their varied technological capacities, they may be discouraged from active engagement through informal barriers such as ageist attitudes.
- Phone calls can be a quick and effective two-way communication tool.
- Use clear, open, and plain, respectful language.
- In written materials, fonts should be large and easy-to-read. Avoid white text on a color background unless high contrast.
- Determine if additional support or training is needed to enable the use of digital tools and provide adequate training.
- Consider the best ways to include a diverse range of older adults. Be aware that older adults face different barriers, such as hearing and visual impairments.

Resources:

- [City of Seattle Meeting the Needs of People with disabilities.](#)
- [Southern Maine Agency on Aging](#)
- [A Practical Guide to Effective Engagement with Older People](#)
- [National Association of Area Agencies on Aging](#)
- [National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults](#)

B. Visually Impaired or Blind Populations

The use of digital tools provides new opportunity for people with visual impairments or blindness to meaningfully engage in the public participation process. Digital documents permit the customization of font size and style, contrast polarity, and layout to optimize reading displays on digital devices. Because visual impairments can affect people in a variety of ways, it is important to consider digital engagement tools that can accommodate personal assistive technologies in addition to features that allow the modification of text and contrast.

Tips and Best Practices:

- Utilize inclusive virtual meeting practices such as having participants mention their name each time they speak.
- Make audio recordings available after the virtual meeting.
- Ask presenters using slideshow tools like PowerPoint to explain the pictures and images used and their relevance to the presentation (“captioned” photos and images).
- Use text alternatives for all digital images (“captioned” photos and images).
- Use Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) compliance levels to ensure supplemental materials are accessible.

Resources:

- [Maine Department of Labor Accessibility Guide: Alternate Formats](#)
- [Disability Rights Maine: Assistive Technologies](#)
- [ADA National Network](#)
- [Colorado Department of Education: Visual Impairment Resources](#)

C. Deaf or Hearing-Impaired Populations

Advances in technology have made it possible for the Deaf community to engage more deeply and independently in the public decision-making process. In a virtual landscape, deaf or hearing-impaired populations often rely on screen readers, and increasingly voice-based virtual assistants, when interacting with computer systems. Integrating the regular use of these virtual tools will enable the inclusive participation of populations that experience hearing impairments or deafness.

Tips and Best Practices:

- Outline meeting rules such as having only one person speak at a time or asking people to raise their hands if they wish to speak; this will give everyone the opportunity to contribute.
- Ask participants to spell out acronyms, speak slowly, to use their camera so they are visible.
- Utilize live or automated Closed Captioning services during the meeting, paying close attention for possible mistakes or misspellings.
- Ensure that video conferencing platforms are compatible with personal assistive technologies such as personal assistive listening systems.
- Ask presenters to provide PowerPoint or other slide decks in advance to make available to the caption writer.
- Use qualified ASL Interpretation services when needed (American Sign Language). Be aware that some sign language users cannot read captions, and not all Deaf people use ASL.

Resources:

- [ASL Interpreting Services in Maine](#)
- [Disability Rights Maine: Deaf Services](#)
- [The Accessibility Switchboard.](#)
- [Design for Accessibility](#)
- [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#)
- [Rooted in Rights](#)
- [Deaf/Hard of Hearing Technology Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center](#)

Case Study: Disability Rights Maine (DRME)

Disability Rights Maine is Maine's Protection & Advocacy agency for people with disabilities. When conducting online meetings, DRME clearly defines meeting rules and guidelines to ensure all participants are able to access and understand the meeting content and have the opportunity to participate. For instance, spelling out acronyms, speaking slowly and using the camera, if possible, so everyone is visible and feels connected. Moreover, arrangements to provide live captioning services are made before any virtual meeting to ensure compatibility with the software platform.

D. Immigrants and Refugees

Immigrants and refugees face many hurdles to access programs and services such as language barriers, unfamiliarity with available services, and cultural barriers. Effectively engaging immigrant and refugee communities requires additional support that may include acquiring translation and interpreter services, collaborating with organizations, and cultural integration.

Tips and Best Practices:

- Collaborate and partner with different organizations that also provide services to immigrant and refugee communities to extend reach.
- Translate your website, social media, surveys, presentations, videos, and other written materials into the languages most used in your community.
- Make sure materials are appropriately translated by asking a member of the community to test them. Bear in mind that Google Translate is not a reliable service for translations as it often translates incorrectly.
- Prepare your English (original) version document for translation by making sure your information is written in plain language (fourth-grade reading level) and graphics are culturally universal. This will facilitate translation services.
- When using interpreters for virtual meetings, it is best to find interpreters from the community.
- Ask presenters to speak slowly. Ask presenters to provide PowerPoint or other slide decks in advance to make available to the interpreter and captioner.
- Inform your audience when you publicize your virtual meeting event that interpretation services are available upon request.

Resources:

- [King County Written Language Translation Process Manual](#)
- [Plain language checker \(how easy to read\)](#)
- [Building and Sustaining Community Collaborations for Refugees Welcome: A Community Engagement Toolkit](#)
- [Atlanta Regional Commission Limited English Proficiency Plan](#)

Case Study: City of Portland, Office of Economic Opportunity

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Portland Office of Economic Opportunity has combined virtual and digital tools to reach Portland residents. Some of their strategies include working collaboratively with Natural Helpers and translation service providers.

The Natural Helpers Leadership program is designed to bridge the gap between residents and the resources available by identifying, training, and empowering local immigrants. The City works with Natural Helpers to disseminate information using digital tools that the immigrant and refugee community already uses, such as WhatsApp.

Additionally, the City uses four interpretation providers, and has a contract with the City's Office of Minority Health to work with its Community Health Outreach Workers. The Community Health Outreach Workers serve as advocates, interpreters, and translators to ensure that the translated materials are accurate and timely.

E. Youth Populations

Youth are an often untapped but valuable resource for positive community change. While most young people are comfortable using digital tools to engage in social contexts, engaging young people to play a role in the development of their own communities can be challenging. If done right, digital communication can be a powerful tool for reaching many young people. According to a study conducted by the Associated Press - NORC Center for Public Affairs, almost 90% of adolescents have access to a smartphone and over 70% of teens and those ages 18 to 24 use Instagram and Snapchat. Capturing their attention requires listening to their perspectives and giving youth an active role in the process.

Tips and Best Practices:

- Avoid tokenizing young people. Youth are easily discouraged from active engagement if they feel their voices are not heard.
- Social media platforms can facilitate young people's ability to participate in the dialogue and can be used to share information multi-directionally.
- Keep it simple. Information in the digital word is constantly competing for our attention and time. Therefore, it is important to break down information into small segments that are easy to digest and to the point.
- Leverage the tools that are already present and regularly utilized by youth to disseminate information. Social platforms widely used by young people include Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok.

Resources

- [Strengthening Communities Through Youth Participation](#)
- [Youth Participatory Evaluation](#)
- [Washington Youth Voice Handbook](#)
- [Youth Involvement and Engagement Assessment tool](#)
- [Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health Youth Engagement Toolkit](#)
- [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development](#)
- [Vermont Afterschool](#)
- [Creating and Sustaining a Thriving Youth Advisory Council](#)

Case Study: Gateway Community Services Youth Community Leaders Program

Youth-led events make a big difference in attendance and responsiveness in public participation. Gateway Community Services (GCS) in Portland, Maine developed a Youth Community Leaders Pilot Program where 15 young men work 10 hours a week to relay information to the rest of the community. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, GCS dramatically changed its approach to engage these young leaders by conducting regular check-in sessions with staff via ZOOM. Knowing the youth population enabled the agency to leverage social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and WhatsApp to effectively communicate important community news. Through the utilization of digital tools and platforms, youth in this program have shared and helped their families understand the updates regarding COVID-19, in addition to sharing other important community news.

F. Low-Income Populations and Access to Broadband

Having access to virtual spaces is largely based on access to broadband and stable internet connections. Rural and low-income households are less likely to have access to broadband (high speed internet). While there has been a significant increase in the use of computers and internet in recent years, approximately one in five households in Maine do not have a broadband internet subscription (American Community Survey Estimates, 2014-2018). According to the Pew Research Center, lower income Americans have lower levels of technology adoption and rely on smartphones to access the internet. Approximately 26% of adults living in households earning less than \$30,000 a year are “smartphone-dependent” internet users – meaning they own a smartphone, but do not have broadband internet at home. As information, services, and resources move online, digital inequality may contribute to low public participation rates among low-income populations and populations that do not have access to broadband.

Tips and Best Practices:

- Utilize non-digital engagement tools as a supplement to digital tools in rural areas.
- Ensure all digital engagement tools are mobile phone compatible.
- Utilize texting and paper mail.
- Consider the bandwidth (required download speeds) of all digital platforms and materials. Avoid digital tools that require downloads or are heavy data users.
- Work with partner organizations to help low-income people access the internet (utilize hot-spots/apply for lifeline program).
- Allow telephone call-in options (including for public comments) to accommodate people with limited access to broadband in virtual meetings.
- Utilize televised town halls and radio to keep people updated.

Resources:

- [Federal Lifeline program](#)
- [Low-Income Broadband Pilot Program](#)
- [National Digital Inclusion Alliance](#)
- [National Digital Equity Center](#)

IV. DIGITAL TOOLS

Digital inclusion is an important part of broader efforts to create strong, inclusive communities and improve opportunities and quality of life for all Americans. Digital tools such as online surveys and virtual town halls open doors to greater public participation as they eliminate barriers such as travel time, discomfort in speaking publicly, and coordinating transportation to meeting places. While using virtual spaces and tools are effective in engaging community members, digital tools should be used to complement the existing techniques to engage communities, not as a replacement. It is important to select digital tools with consideration for ensuring access and inclusivity among communities that have historically been discouraged in the engagement process. This section looks at different digital engagement tools and considerations for accessibility and ease of use.

A. Tool Selection Process

Appropriate tools should be selected by assessing key criteria based on your engagement goals. In selecting virtual tools that best meet your engagement goals, consider:

- What capacity does the tool have to accommodate to people with disabilities and language access?
- Does the tool provide options for participation without a smartphone, computer, or reliable internet access?
- How will you overcome barriers to participation from people who are new to or intimidated by virtual meetings?
- Does the tool encourage active participation and inclusivity?
- How strong are security features for the tool or platform?

GPCOG developed the following matrix to rank tools - in this case live polling - based on the criteria most relevant to our engagement needs. Based on the final score of each live polling platform, GPCOG selected the top three tools to trial during small-group meetings. Information from the trials is informing use of tools going forward. Creating a similar matrix of available to tools can be helpful in deciding which tool(s) meet the needs of your virtual engagement plan.

Live Polling Tools Rating Matrix		Tool #1	Tool #2	Tool #3
Criteria	Includes accommodations for disabilities and language access			
	Deployment on different devices			
	Compatible with other software programs; ZOOM, PowerPoint			
	Ease of use; easy set up and easy for the end user			
	Audience interaction: how does the audience complete the poll, ex. Smartphone, text, etc.			
	Cost			
	Features per package; Ex. crowdsource question tools, types of survey questions			

B. Types of Digital Tools

Digital tools are defined as software platforms for teaching and learning that can be used with computers or mobile devices to work with text, images, audio, and video.

- **Online Survey or Questionnaire Tools:** Surveys or questionnaires are used to assess thoughts, opinions, and feelings of a specific population on any particular topic. Online surveys also provide multiple ways to ask a question (e.g. multiple choice, text, ranking order, etc.), which can be useful in keeping the respondents engaged. The University of Southern Maine’s Data Innovation Project prepared this comprehensive [comparison of online survey tools](#).
- **Live Polling:** “Audience response software” or live polling tools enable interactive participation of the audience in meetings, conferences, events, trainings, and educational programs. The ability to provide real-time feedback provides additional engagement for stakeholders and the public. Popular tools include:
 - [Mentimeter](#)
 - [Vevox](#)
 - [AhaSlides](#)
 - [Slido](#)
 - [Polleverywhere](#)
- **Mapping and Data Visualization Software:** Mapping and Data visualization software uses data to capture, store, and display data to help organizations better understand spatial patterns and relationships. Moreover, interactive GIS maps and data dashboards allow community members the opportunity to interact and get involved with the project. Mapping and data visualization software includes: [ArcGIS](#), [Tableau](#), and [Datavrapper](#).
- **Gamification:** Gamification software is any tool or platform that applies game-like features and mechanics to non-game contexts in order to encourage engagement. Using gamification software as part of our virtual engagement strategy can increase the level of engagement. Some examples of gamification software used for virtual engagement include [Metroquest](#), [Gamitize](#), [Engagedly](#) and [Kahoot](#).
- **Web conferencing software:** Web conferencing software has filled the need created by social distancing regulations and often times serve as the primary platform for virtual public engagement. Web conferencing software enables organizations to conduct interactive conferences and meetings via the internet and create virtual spaces for engagement. The Municipal Research and Services Center prepared this [comparison of video and teleconferencing platforms](#).
- **Social Media and Community Forum platforms:** Using social media to disseminate information, connect, and engage can be effective because most are easy to use and they are already popular with community members. Organizations should be cautious when using for controversial projects and ensure time is available to provide adequate moderation. The most popular tools are:
 - Facebook and Instagram
 - Snapchat
 - Twitter

- Next Door
- Vanilla
- WhatsApp
- TikTok
- **Digital Assistive Technology or Adaptive Tools:** Assistive technology or adaptive tools are devices, software, or equipment that helps people with disabilities fully participate and complete tasks. Tools include closed captioning, text to speech, screen readers, and screen magnification software. Bates College prepared this summary of [Free and Low-Cost Assistive Technology Resources](#).
- **Live streaming services:** Online streaming media simultaneously recorded and broadcasted in real time. Live streaming public meetings or events presents a new opportunity for cities organizations to expand their reach an approach virtual public engagement more creatively. Steaming services commonly used for virtual public engagement include YouTube, Facebook Live, Vimeo, and Public Input.
- **Interactive mapping:** Interactive mapping tools such as ArcGIS and Tableau can enable location-focused discussion. Utilizing GIS tools can make it easier to create graphics and maps. These tools allow community members opportunities to interact and get involved with the project. Duke University compiled this [Comparison of Online Digital Mapping Tools](#).

C. Non-Digital Tools

As we continue to publicly engage in virtual spaces, it is important to understand that not all community members can be reached in virtual spaces. In most cases, it will be necessary to use a mixture of digital and non-digital tools in order to reach community members who may not have access to broadband or who have limited technological skills. Additionally, non-digital means may get people’s attention while your emails and social media outreach can get lost in ocean of communications people are experiencing.

Some non-digital tools and methods of engagement include:

- Postcards and mailers
- Flyers placed at community locations
- Phone calls
- Newspaper ads or opinion pieces

Resources:

- [The FHWA Virtual Public Involvement Resources](#)
- [Digital Engagement, Social Media & Public Participation](#)

V. SPOTLIGHT ON NATIONAL LEADERS

As GPCOG conducted research on best practices for inclusive and accessible virtual engagement, several planning agencies and cities emerged as leaders in the field. Below are highlights of their most notable practices for equitable virtual engagement.

North Jersey Transportation Planning Agency (NJTPA)

The North Jersey Transportation Planning Agency (NJTPA) is committed to seeking input from those who have been historically under-represented in transportation planning decisions. Part of the agency's Public Participation Plan is to use targeted strategies to engage historically under-represented populations, including children and teens, immigrants and individuals with limited-English proficiency, low-income residents, younger adults, older adults, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities.

The agency uses several virtual engagement tools, such as emails to communicate with subscribers and mailing lists to reach member agencies and other stakeholders. Several social media accounts are used to highlight key agency events and initiatives (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest and YouTube). Local newspapers, hyper-local news websites, and other traditional media are also used to publicize meetings, events, and projects. Board and Committee meetings are livestreamed in the agency's website, YouTube channel, and on other social media platforms.

The agency uses the IAP2 Spectrum to determine the level of participation and selects engagement tools based on the target audience. For instance, if a significant portion of area residents speak a language other than English, the agency will strive to conduct activities partially or entirely in that language to the extent that resources allow. By integrating the use of digital and non-digital tools into their public engagement plan, NJTPA is able to reach the broader public in addition to their harder to reach communities.

Link:

[NJTPA Virtual Public Engagement Best Practices](#)

Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)

While COVID-19 has challenged traditional face-to-face events and interactions, it is forcing agencies to extend their reach through alternative participation methods. COVID-19 is also forcing more people to learn how to use online meeting tools, thus creating new opportunities for increased participation. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) recognizes that the landscape is changing in terms of community engagement.

Equity considerations include the digital divide, language barriers, and lack of exposure to different engagement platforms. In order to reach people that lack access to the internet, MAPC started livestreaming many of their public meetings into Facebook and YouTube, which can be viewed from a mobile device. The agency has also used Qualtrics as a survey platform where participants can view and respond to digital meetings.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) has been successful in utilizing Zoom for virtual meetings, allowing participants to phone into the meetings. Zoom also allows important accessibility features, such as the use of closed-captioning and language translation services. To help communities effectively utilize virtual engagement meeting tools, MAPC has created a guide, *Shared Practices for Engagement in Virtual Meetings*, that is available on its website. The detailed guide provides tips on general facilitation, recording, responding to “zoom bombing” and meeting disruptions, technology preparation, and accessibility for people with disabilities.

Links:

[Shared Practices for Engagement in Virtual Meetings](#)

Broward Metropolitan Planning Organization

Since 2013, the Broward Metropolitan Planning Organization has supplemented in-person outreach and events with virtual engagement tools, such as the use of social media platforms, videos, virtual town halls, online and phone surveys, digital input mapping, etc. The agency’s website is available in different languages and contains buttons to increase or decrease the font size. Every webpage has a link to Broward MPO’s social media platforms.

In 2014 Speak Up Broward started its televised eTownhall Meeting Series, which combines multiple technologies to provide people with options for participating. Participants can use different platforms, such as a chat window on the website, telephone, or social media to ask questions from the live panelist. The virtual town hall videos are televised, and web streamed and can be viewed at any time in the agency website and YouTube channel. Broward MPO also makes extensive use of easy to understand videos to keep the community informed about transportation projects and ongoing plans.

Broward MPO has successfully incorporated non-traditional outreach methods to reach traditionally underrepresented populations. Part of the agency’s public participation plan includes asking participants for their zip codes to ensure outreach is effectively engaging environmental justice areas. Using zip code data, the agency can pivot their engagement plan to reach a target population. They also use targeted Facebook advertisements in different languages to reach specific residents. Non-English speakers can view the agency’s website in different languages and the agency uses targeted print and online news outlets to reach various minority communities.

Links:

[eTownhall Troubleshooting Guide](#)

[eTownhall Meetings webpage](#)

[Broward MPO Resources](#)

[Social Networking & Social Media Terms of Use](#)

Salt Lake City

Salt Lake City has been experimenting with digital engagement for many years and found that online engagement tools are important for reaching stakeholders that are unable to participate in traditional face-to-face events. The city uses many different platforms/tools for digital engagement, including social media tools, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and NextDoor for Input/Output. Social media posts are managed by a team that coordinates across the city's departments, providing consistency and ensuring two-way conversations between the followers and the city. The city's website also hosts a centralized location called the Salt Lake City Feedback Community, where constituents can find all available online engagement information and sign-up for notifications.

Prior to COVID-19, Salt Lake City's public engagement process consisted of blending online and in-person engagement. Salt Lake City maintains its own video channel, SLCTv (Salt Lake City Television) that it used to broadcast meetings and produce videos for outreach.

The city conducted online surveys using the Qualtrics platform and other tools, such as Poll Everywhere and GoToMeetings in presentations. For virtual public meetings, the city mostly uses Facebook Live Q&A as a platform, which allows the public to send live feedback via the comments section. During these virtual public meetings, the city uses a dedicated email and phone line for taking public comments. Comments can also be emailed or phoned in prior to meetings.

The Salt Lake City Civic Engagement Team created a best practices guide to help other cities and organizations implement virtual engagement during COVID-19.

Link:

[Practices for Engagement in the Time of COVID 2020](#)

APPENDIX A:

Maine-Based Organizations Interviewed			
Number	Organization	Representative	Title
1	City of Portland's Office of Economic Opportunity	Julia Trujillo-Luengo	Director
2	Mano en Mano	Ian Yaffe	Executive Director
3	Telecommunications Relay Services, Disability Rights Maine	Debra Bare-Rogers Rick Langley	Advocate Client Assistance Program Director
4	Catholic Charities Maine Refugee and Immigration Services	Hannah DeAngelis	Director
5	Maine Department of Labor, Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired	Lauren Goldsmith	Orientation and Mobility Specialist
6	Southern Maine Area Agency on Aging	Anna Guest Doug Wilson	Agewell Program Manager Agewell Program Specialist
7	Gateway Community Services	Kate Fahey	Director of Programs
8	Maine Department of Labor, Division for Blind and Visually Impaired	Eric Dibner	State ADA/Section 504 Accessibility Coordinator

APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A. Virtual Engagement

FHWA Virtual Public Involvement Resources: Provides video instructions, fact sheets and additional resources about several types of online public involvement activities, including virtual town halls.

Link: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement/vpi/

International Association for Public Participation Canada (IAP2). (2017). Digital Engagement, Social Media & Public Participation. This document provides guidance, explains different categories, and provides examples of digital engagement tools. Link:

https://www.iap2canada.ca/resources/Documents/Newsletter/2017_social_media_white_paper.pdf

American Planning Association Knowledgebase Collection: Online Public Engagement Link:

<https://planning.org/knowledgebase/onlineengagement/>

Local Government Commission: Best Practices for Virtual Engagement May 2020. This document provides a summary of best practices, key considerations, and specific guidance. Link:

<https://www.lgc.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LGC-Virtual-Engagement-Best-Practices-Guide.pdf>

B. Accessibility

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)

Bureau of Internet Accessibility (BOIA): Developing the Accessibility Mindset. Link:

<https://www.boia.org/ebook-developing-the-accessibility-mindset>

Georgia Tech Center for Inclusive Design and Innovation: Tips for Making Digital Learning Accessible. Provides instructions on how to prepare accessible documents, including PowerPoint presentations. Link: <https://cidi.gatech.edu/digital-learning>

C. Equitable Engagement

PACTS Public Involvement Plan

Link: https://www.gpcog.org/DocumentCenter/View/1271/PACTS-Public-Involvement-Plan-Updated-June-20_new

PACTS Inclusive Transportation Planning Toolkit

Link: <https://www.gpcog.org/DocumentCenter/View/425/Public-Involvement-Plan-PIP-Appendix-E-Inclusive-Transportation-Planning-Toolkit-Draft-PDF?bidId=>

Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge (SPARCC)

Link: <http://www.sparcchub.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/EECE-V4.pdf>

Atlanta Community Engagement Playbook

Link: <http://ourcommunity.is/engaged/documents/Atlanta-Playbook.pdf>

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