



Virtual Public Involvement Practices in NEPA

Virginia Department of Transportation Interstate-495 Express Lanes Northern Extension

This case study discusses virtual public involvement (VPI) strategies implemented by the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to help meet National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) public hearing requirements for the Interstate (I) 495 Express Lanes Northern Extension (495 NEXT) project. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) typically requires that agencies hold in-person NEPA public hearings, in accordance with 23 U.S. Code (U.S.C.) § 128. VDOT held a hybrid public hearing that included both virtual and in-person participation options. VDOT found that offering a hybrid public hearing – and using other VPI strategies as part of the 495 NEXT project – led to multiple benefits for both the agency and the public.



495 NEXT Project Background

The 495 NEXT project in northern Virginia is extending the existing I-495 express lanes by approximately two-and-a-half miles to reduce congestion, enhance roadway safety, and improve travel time reliability. The project also includes the replacement of existing I-495 bridge crossings and noise walls, among other improvements. See Figure 1 for a map of the project.

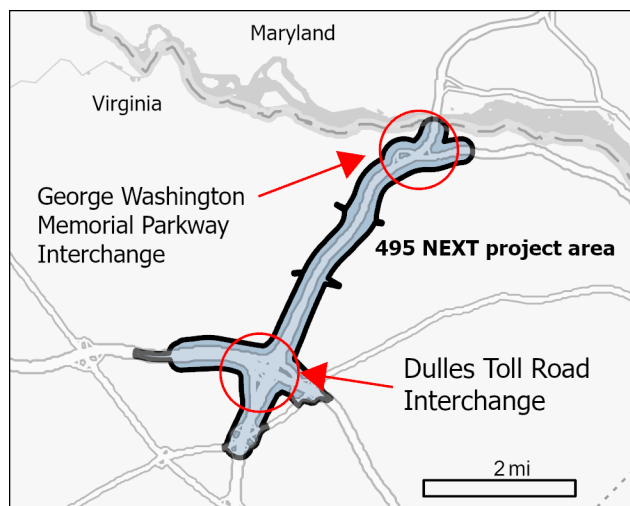


Figure 1. Map of the project. 495 NEXT will extend the I-495 express lanes by approximately two-and-a-half miles from the I-495 and Dulles Corridor interchange to the vicinity of the American Legion Bridge. Map/data sources: VDOT, Fairfax Co., Esri.

- 2018**
 - Virginia's Commonwealth Transportation Board approved \$6 million for VDOT to conduct an environmental study for 495 NEXT project
 - June: Public meeting #1
- 2019**
 - May: Public meeting #2
- 2020**
 - February: Environmental Assessment (EA) published
 - September 28 and 30, question and answer (Q&A) sessions
 - October 5 and 8: Hybrid location and design public hearing
 - December: Extended EA comment period closed
- 2021**
 - July: Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) issued by FHWA
- 2022**
 - March: Final design and construction begins

In 2018, VDOT began project outreach for 495 NEXT. Outreach initially included VPI efforts as well as in-person public information meetings. Due to restrictions on public gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, VDOT canceled the public

hearing for the project (originally scheduled on March 12, 2020). As alternatives, the VDOT project manager and team interacted with residents and stakeholders via phone, virtual meetings and through individual, outdoor meetings, if requested. With large-scale in-person project outreach paused, the [project website](#) became the primary source for information.



Project-Specific VPI Approach

In summer 2020, the 495 NEXT project team began planning for a hybrid public hearing that included both virtual and in-person components. On September 28 and 30, 2020, prior to the hybrid public hearing, the project team held two virtual Q&A sessions over a web-based platform to allow opportunities for interactive dialogue among project leadership, technical staff, and the public while also serving as a dry run for the hybrid public hearing. Over 100 people attended each Q&A session. A 15-minute project presentation preceded the Q&A period (see Figure 3), during which attendees could ask questions verbally by using the web-based platform’s ‘raise hand’ tool or by typing in a chat box. VDOT recorded the sessions and published the recordings on the project website for interested parties to view at their convenience.

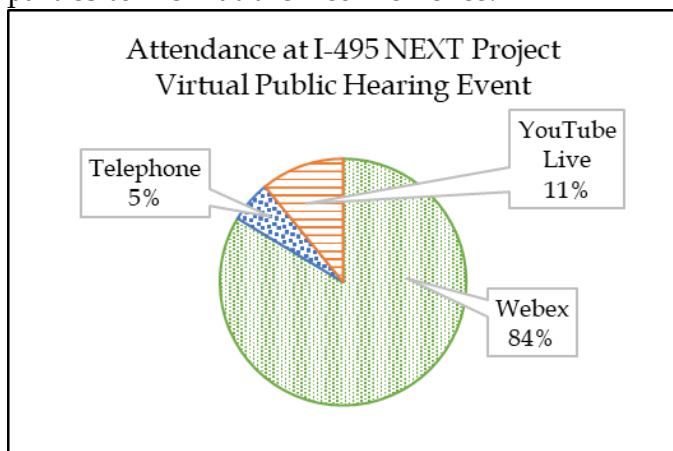


Figure 2. Pie chart comparing viewing methods for the virtual public hearing for the I-495 NEXT Project.

VDOT held the virtual component of the public hearing on October 5th, 2020, over the web-based platform. The team live streamed the hearing on

VDOT’s video sharing channel, providing an additional viewing option for the public while also providing options for phone call-ins. The hearing began with a live, scripted presentation followed by an open comment period where members of the public could provide input or ask questions. Once this comment period concluded, the team responded to additional questions from the public. Approximately 220 people participated in the virtual hearing—184 joined online via the web-based platform; 12 joined by telephone; and 24 people viewed the hearing on VDOT’s video sharing channel (see Figure 2). VDOT posted the recorded meeting on the agency’s website and on its [video sharing channel](#).

AVDOT held the in-person component of the public hearing on October 8, 2020, at the McLean Community Center, located in the project area. Individuals were required to register in advance to attend this hearing; walk-ins were not accepted. During the hearing, project staff played a continuous loop recording of the hearing presentation and had court reporters present to document comments for the project record. Several technical experts and VDOT staff attended in person, while other technical experts and staff attended the meeting virtually. Twenty-five stakeholders attended the in-person public hearing.

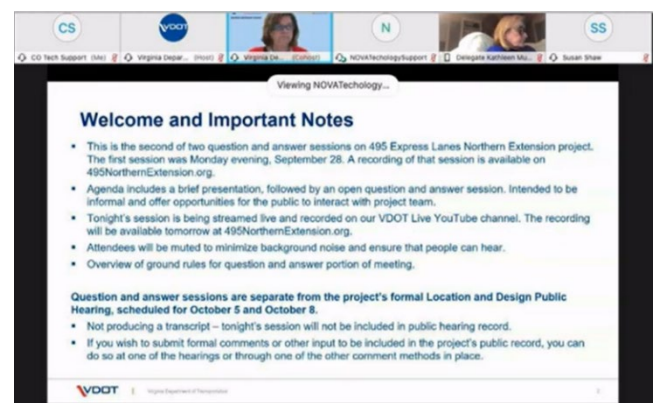


Figure 1. VDOT’s Q&A was accessible via telephone, web-based platform, and video sharing channel. This screenshot shows the livestream recording as it appears on the video sharing channel. Source: VDOT.



Reaching Underserved Populations

VDOT recognized the need to provide project information and notifications to traditionally underserved populations using the following traditional and virtual engagement techniques:

- **Publishing hearing notices in newspapers with primary audiences from predominant environmental justice (EJ) populations in the study area.** Advertising the hybrid public hearing opportunity through the city and local newspapers, including a Spanish-language newspaper, enabled VDOT to increase its reach to populations who do not have access to or regularly use the internet and those with limited English proficiency. VDOT published information in newspapers 30 days prior to the hearing and again five to 12 days prior.
- **Mailing postcards to all property owners and residents in the study area** 30 days prior to the hearing. Mailers included a map of the project area, public hearing opportunities, and where to find materials and provide comments for residents without internet access.
- **Sending out letters to resource and regulatory agency partners and elected officials** 30 to 40 days prior to the public hearing.
- **Posting information in public places**, such as courthouses and libraries, 30 to 40 days prior to the public hearing.
- **Distributing press releases and notices** to local media, beginning 30 days prior to the public hearing.
- **Holding small, outdoor, in-person meetings** with stakeholders by request.
- **Using social media**, as well as using email and the project website to share project updates and hearing information.

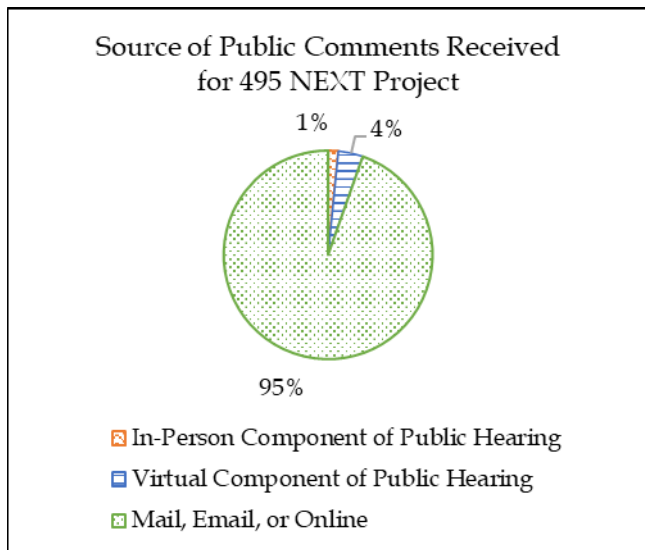


Figure 4. Pie chart comparing public comments received at hearings (41 total) compared to other methods (720 total) for the I-495 NEXT Project.

During the virtual component of the public hearing, 29 people provided comments; 12 people provided comments during the in-person component of the public hearing (four comment sheets and eight provided to the court reporter). Comments provided asynchronously greatly outnumbered comments received during the public hearing: VDOT received a total of 720 comments by mail, email, or online: 60 comment sheets and letters were received by mail or in-person; 417 comments were received by email; and 243 comments were submitted through the website. See Figure 4.



Challenges

The VDOT project team adopted a “learn as we go” strategy when planning the 495 NEXT hybrid public hearing, given that the team had not previously incorporated virtual techniques into public hearings. The project team took advantage of multiple learning opportunities, such as the virtual Q&A sessions held in September 2020, to quickly orient themselves to available technologies. The team also collaborated with the FHWA Virginia Division Office and FHWA Headquarters throughout the meeting planning process to ensure they met NEPA and other statutory requirements.



Benefits of Virtual Public Hearings and VPI

According to VDOT, using VPI strategies has helped the agency increase its reach to various populations. VDOT believes that offering a hybrid public hearing for the 495 NEXT project was an effective public engagement strategy. The hybrid public hearing and virtual Q&A sessions enhanced opportunities for Virginia residents and project stakeholders to be informed about the 495 NEXT project and provide comments.

VDOT found that a greater number of residents and stakeholders provided input on the 495 NEXT project through the hybrid public hearing approach and earlier virtual Q&A sessions, as compared to the number of comments received on similar projects during previous in-person-only meetings and public hearings. Furthermore, VDOT found more than 330 stakeholders viewed its online recordings of the 495 NEXT virtual Q&A sessions and more than 90 stakeholders viewed the recording of the virtual public hearing since publication in October 2020.

VDOT also found that the use of social media helped broaden and increase the effectiveness of its outreach efforts for 495 NEXT while allowing it to better tailor information to specific populations in the project study area. For example, VDOT purchased advertisements on social media to promote the project meetings and public hearing to geotargeted residents and stakeholders within the study area (by ZIP code). Posting information on the community-based platform also helped to spread awareness of the project and hearing opportunities to directly affected neighborhoods and communities.

VDOT also reported that the ability to submit comments through the project website increased opportunities for the public to share input on 495 NEXT.



Lessons Learned

Close coordination with FHWA is essential to effectively deploy VPI strategies for public engagement.

FHWA can provide feedback and guidance to assist States in incorporating VPI strategies into public involvement plans (PIPs). FHWA can also offer opportunities to connect with peers on VPI and public hearings.

Virtual Q&A sessions create additional opportunities for residents to engage with project teams and ask important questions. Because public hearings may have time constraints, and virtual public hearings may not sufficiently offer the opportunity for project dialogue, stakeholders may be able to develop a more complete understanding of the project through Q&A sessions. This may allow stakeholders to submit more informed comments for the project record during a public hearing.

Preparation for virtual meetings and hearings should include rehearsals and development of a detailed script. VDOT utilized a full meeting script for its hybrid public hearing and engaged in several practice sessions to ensure a streamlined, successful meeting.

VPI strategies provide learning opportunities for agency staff. VDOT noted that the virtual Q&A sessions provided a learning opportunity for the project team to better understand how to use a virtual presentation platform ahead of the actual hearing. Agency staff did not have previous experience with using these types of platforms for public hearings, prior to using the web-based platform for the 495 NEXT project.





Next Steps

FHWA issued a FONSI for the 495 NEXT project in July 2021.

Construction began in March 2022, and the new, extended lanes are expected to open in 2025.

VDOT expects to continue to use VPI strategies in public engagement efforts. VDOT also noted that many stakeholders expect that VPI strategies will be incorporated into future agency outreach efforts and may prefer to engage with VDOT through VPI forums.

To plan for this continued use, VDOT incorporated VPI strategies into the State PIP, understanding that virtual meetings cannot fully replace in-person meetings but seeing an opportunity to use VPI strategies to help complement more traditional outreach efforts. VDOT predicts an increase in overall public engagement as the agency begins to integrate VPI strategies more comprehensively into its transportation project planning and NEPA outreach efforts.

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For more information on virtual public involvement (VPI) refer to the following website:

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

For more information on NEPA public hearing requirements refer to the following website:

https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/nepa/trans_decisionmaking.aspx

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