



Virtual Public Involvement Practices in NEPA

Maryland Transportation Authority Chesapeake Bay Crossing Study: Tier 1

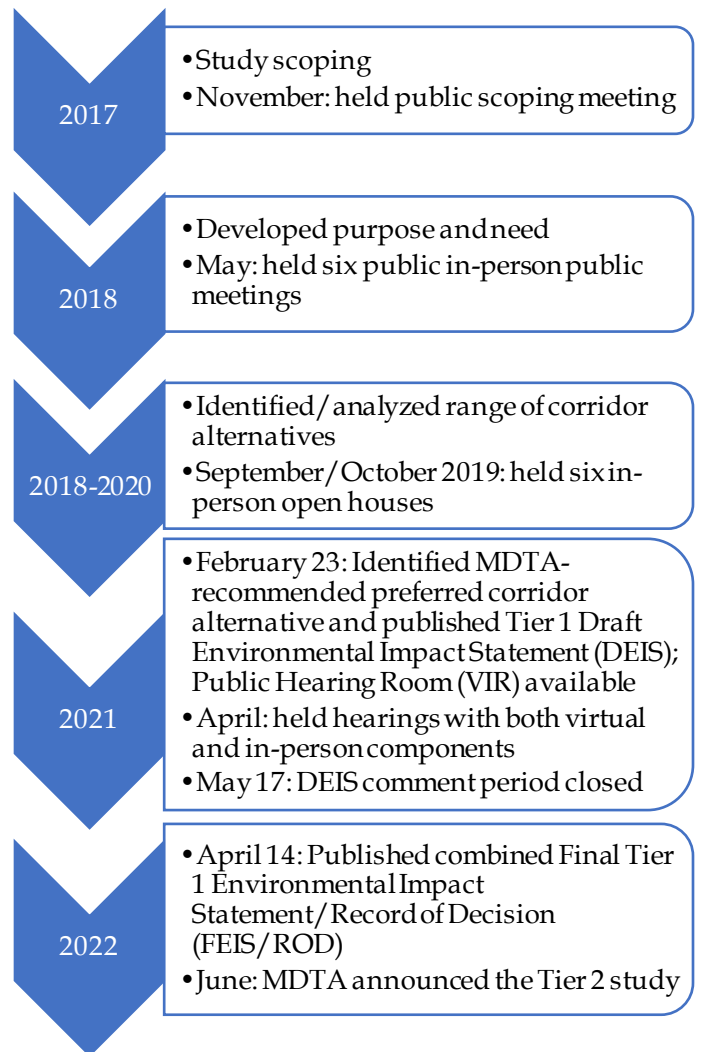
This case study discusses virtual public involvement (VPI) strategies implemented by the Maryland Transportation Authority (MDTA) to meet National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) public hearing requirements for the Chesapeake Bay Crossing Study: Tier 1 NEPA (Tier 1 Study). The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) typically requires that agencies hold in-person public hearings, in accordance with 23 U.S. Code (U.S.C.) § 128. MDTA held public hearings with both virtual and in-person participation options. The public hearings consisted of a [virtual information room \(VIR\)](#), which was made available in February 2021 on [www.baycrossingstudy.com](#), and a series of virtual and in-person live testimony sessions held in April 2021. MDTA held multiple virtual and in-person events to reach the broad audience in the 100-square mile study area.



Chesapeake Bay Crossing Study: Tier 1 NEPA Background

The Chesapeake Bay separates most of Maryland between Eastern and Western shores. Currently, the William Preston Lane Jr. Memorial Bridge (Bay Bridge) is the only way to cross the bay in the state of Maryland. MDTA is following a tiered NEPA process to identify and assess the impacts of an alternative for creating a new crossing and provide congestion relief at the existing Bay Bridge. This case study describes the Tier 1 portion of this effort. In the Tier 1 study, MDTA conducted initial assessments across a 100-square mile study area (see Figure 1) to select a corridor alternative for the new crossing.

The Tier 1 study concluded in April 2022. In June 2022, MDTA announced the Tier 2 Study. In Tier 2, MDTA will evaluate a range of alternatives, including a no-build alternative, within the two-mile-wide selected corridor alternative identified during the Tier 1 NEPA Study.



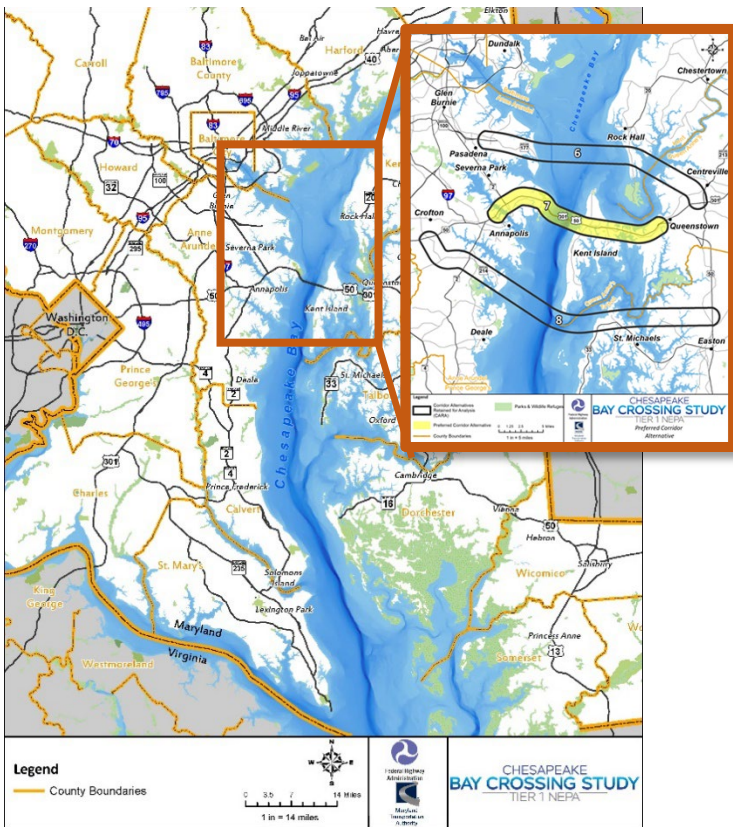


Figure 1. Map of the Chesapeake Bay Crossing Tier 1 Study area. Source: MDTA.

Study-Specific VPI Approach

The MDTA, in coordination with FHWA, held public hearings with virtual and in-person participation options. The public hearings had two components: a VIR and live testimony sessions.

The VIR (see Figure 2) was available on the [study website](#) starting in February 2021. The VIR had 11 viewing stations, or boards, dedicated to different information about the study, such as corridor alternatives, traffic and environmental analyses, and next steps. Users could select the option to hear an audio board description. From the VIR, participants could also register to provide live testimony at one of the public hearing sessions and submit comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) via a form.



Figure 2. Screenshot of the virtual information room (VIR). Source: [MDTA's Chesapeake Bay Crossing Study website](#).

MDTA held four virtual and two in-person live testimony sessions in April 2021. The virtual sessions were held on April 14 and 15, with one afternoon session and one evening session on each day to accommodate schedules of as many stakeholders as possible. MDTA hosted the virtual sessions utilizing a virtual platform that allowed stakeholders to view the session over an internet browser and give call-in testimony live or by private voicemail. A moderator called on participants to speak. MDTA held the in-person sessions on April 21 and 22, 2021, with one session on each shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Stakeholders were required to pre-register to give live testimony, which helped the MDTA manage capacity at the in-person sessions. All live testimony sessions were live-streamed and archived on the Chesapeake Bay Crossing Study [video sharing channel](#). In addition to live and voicemail testimony, MDTA accepted comments via private testimony, email, mail, or a comment form on the study website.

MDTA created a comprehensive study website where stakeholders could read information about the study, view the DEIS, enter the VIR, learn where to find paper copies of the DEIS, and submit comments. The website also contained recordings of the live testimony sessions and all public comments received since the beginning of the study.

MDTA conducted an extensive outreach strategy to ensure that stakeholders knew about the study and how to provide comments. The strategy included advertisements in print and digital media, press releases, social media (see Table 1 for methods),

email blasts (e-blasts), and mail. The study team also sent notices to elected officials and community leaders such as places of worship, community centers, school officials, and Chambers of Commerce) to share with their communities.



Reaching Underserved Populations

MDTA advertised widely to reach underserved populations and environmental justice (EJ) communities. The study team ran ads in 23 newspapers, including four minority and Spanish-language papers as well as smaller rural papers, and digital ads on 13 websites, including four minority and Spanish websites. Visitors could view the study website in 59 languages and view the public hearing displays in Spanish. For stakeholders without internet access, MDTA offered hard copies of the DEIS for viewing at 13 public libraries. MDTA also arranged to deliver hard copies of the DEIS and content of the VIR boards upon request.

MDTA ensured that those without internet access could provide public testimony via phone at the virtual testimony sessions.



Benefits of VPI

Based on MDTA’s past project experience, the study team realized the benefits of VPI early on for incorporation in the Tier 1 Study. MDTA endeavored to provide the same experience across all platforms – i.e., stakeholders could view study materials and comment in-person, by phone, or through the study website/email. Most comments were received through the study website, followed by email (see Figure 3).

Given the 100-square mile study area, MDTA considered VPI critical to reaching a large audience.

Information was delivered widely via the internet as well as print (see Table 1).

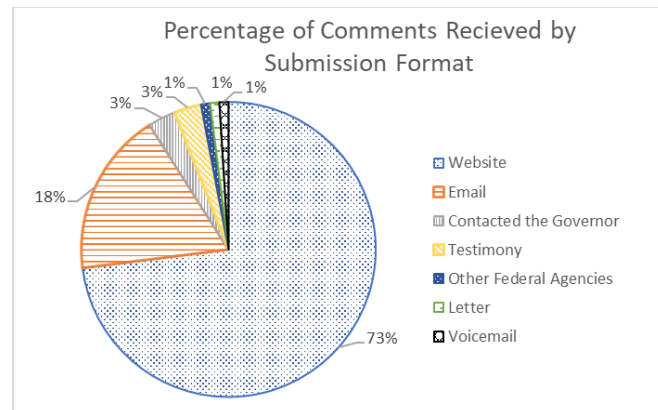


Figure 3. Percent of comments received by submission format. Source: MDTA.

The study website received over 6,500 visits and more than 15,000 page views by the time the comment period ended. Website engagement increased when e-blasts announced that the DEIS was available and when the public hearings were approaching/ occurring. Of the 39 stakeholders who provided live testimony, one-third did so during one of the virtual sessions.

Method	Deliveries/ Impressions	Total Engagement
Press release e-blasts (4 total)	426,596 (106,649 per release)	not measured
Other e-blast announcements (5 total)	8,948 (Avg 1,790 per blast)	530 clicks
Online ads	890,100	1,360 clicks
Social media posts	56,067	1,091 engagements
Email	1,991	not measured
Mail	331	not measured
Print ads	1,458,176 total readership	not measured

Table 1. Number of successful information deliveries/impressions (visits) and engagements by delivery method. Source: derived from data from MDTA.



Challenges

MDTA had to develop its VPI strategy along the way, being flexible

with options and working closely with FHWA to make decisions.

MDTA staff had to learn how to use new engagement platforms, troubleshoot any problems, and ensure a smooth delivery to ensure successful public hearings with both in-person and virtual components. MDTA noted it was important to conduct multiple dry runs of the virtual live testimony sessions and to have technical support available to troubleshoot any difficulties during the event.

The study team was also concerned with managing live participation, both for virtual and in-person live events. MDTA was careful to adhere to time limits for speakers so that every stakeholder had a chance to speak. During the virtual testimony dry runs, MDTA practiced responding to many possible scenarios, including speakers that took over the meeting.



Lessons Learned

Sharing ideas and lessons learned from other projects is valuable for developing VPI strategies. MDTA

developed its VPI approach along with their State partners and FHWA. Staff also contacted other States to ask for information about successful VPI activities.

Providing information online as soon as it is available increases transparency and creates a captive audience from the beginning. MDTA was diligent in posting materials to the study website as soon as meetings were announced. That way, stakeholders had ample time to review the materials and prepare comments and questions. MDTA also posted all comments received throughout the life of the study on the website. Stakeholders provided feedback that they appreciated MDTA's transparency.

Adding a personal touch to VPI may improve stakeholder experience/engagement. MDTA believed that the personal touch of the VIR made it feel like participants were at an in-person meeting. Visitors could virtually "walk" through the VIR at

their own pace and convenience. The VIR also had an audio component to make it more realistic. FHWA and MDTA are considering a chat option that might be incorporated into future VIRs. For example, visitors could chat directly with a subject-matter expert to ask questions about specific topics.

Pre-registration for live events is key to managing attendance. MDTA required stakeholders to pre-register to give live testimony, virtually or in-person. Pre-registration helped MDTA decide how many testimony sessions were needed. Moreover, during the in-person sessions, it allowed MDTA to manage the number of people in the room at the same time. Stakeholders were required to register for in-person sessions by voicemail, and MDTA called them back to confirm. MDTA will likely utilize pre-registration for future events.

Practicing live virtual events reduces unknowns. MDTA emphasized the value of conducting multiple dry runs of virtual events to anticipate any technological or logistical issues. MDTA was diligent in testing multiple possible scenarios during the dry runs to make sure they were prepared for all possibilities.



Next Steps

The comment period for the Chesapeake Bay Crossing Tier 1 Study closed on May 17, 2021.

Taking public comments into consideration, MDTA updated the DEIS to develop the combined Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision (FEIS/ROD). FHWA approved the FEIS/ROD on April 14, 2022, concluding the Tier 1 study. In June 2022, the MDTA board voted to approve funding to initiate a Tier 2 study for the Chesapeake Bridge Crossing that would evaluate a range of alternatives within the corridor alternative selected during the Tier 1 Study. MDTA expects it will take four to five years to complete the Tier 2 study.

When planning future public meetings and hearings, MDTA plans to:



- Incorporate VPI techniques;
- Utilize pre-registration for live events; and,
- Provide access to study information as soon as it is announced.

Except for the statutes and regulations cited, the contents of this document do not have the force and effect of law and are not meant to bind the States or the public in any way. This document is intended only to provide information regarding existing requirements under the law or agency policies.

The U.S. Government does not endorse products or manufacturers. Trademarks or manufacturers' names appear in this document only because they are considered essential to the objective of the document. They are included for informational purposes only and are not intended to reflect a preference, approval, or endorsement of any one product or entity.

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

Source for title image and heading icons: FHWA.

Contact Information

Jeanette Mar
Environmental Program Manager
FHWA Maryland Division
Jeanette.Mar@dot.gov

Heather Lowe
Bay Crossing Study Project
Manager
MDTA
HLowe@mdta.state.md.us

Melissa Bogdan
Community Relations Project
Manager
MDTA
MBogdan@mdta.state.md.us

