



Virtual Public Involvement Practices in NEPA

Kansas Department of Transportation South Lawrence Trafficway

This case study discusses virtual public involvement (VPI) strategies implemented by the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) to help meet National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) public hearing requirements for the South Lawrence Trafficway (SLT) West Leg project. Agencies typically hold in-person public hearings, in accordance with 23 U.S. Code (U.S.C.) § 128. KDOT held a hybrid public hearing with both virtual and in-person participation options, including a virtual component, an in-person component, and a Virtual “Open House.” KDOT leveraged both traditional and virtual outreach strategies, even prior to the pandemic, on the SLT project to ensure robust participation.



South Lawrence Trafficway (SLT) West Leg Project Background

The SLT West Leg project aims to improve safety and mobility for the SLT corridor, and surrounding highways in the City of Lawrence, Kansas. The draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS), issued in April 2021, evaluated expanding the west section of the SLT corridor to a four-lane freeway and modifying access.

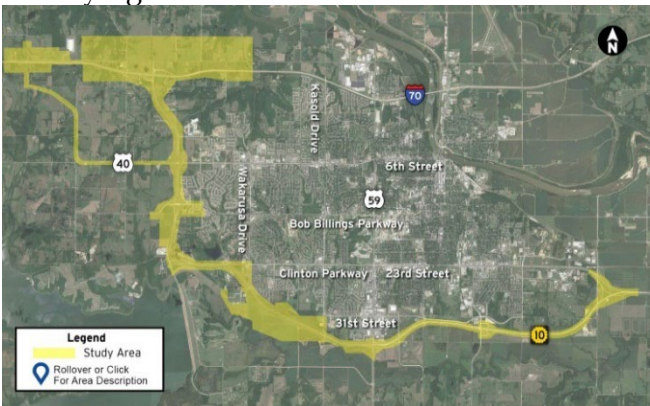
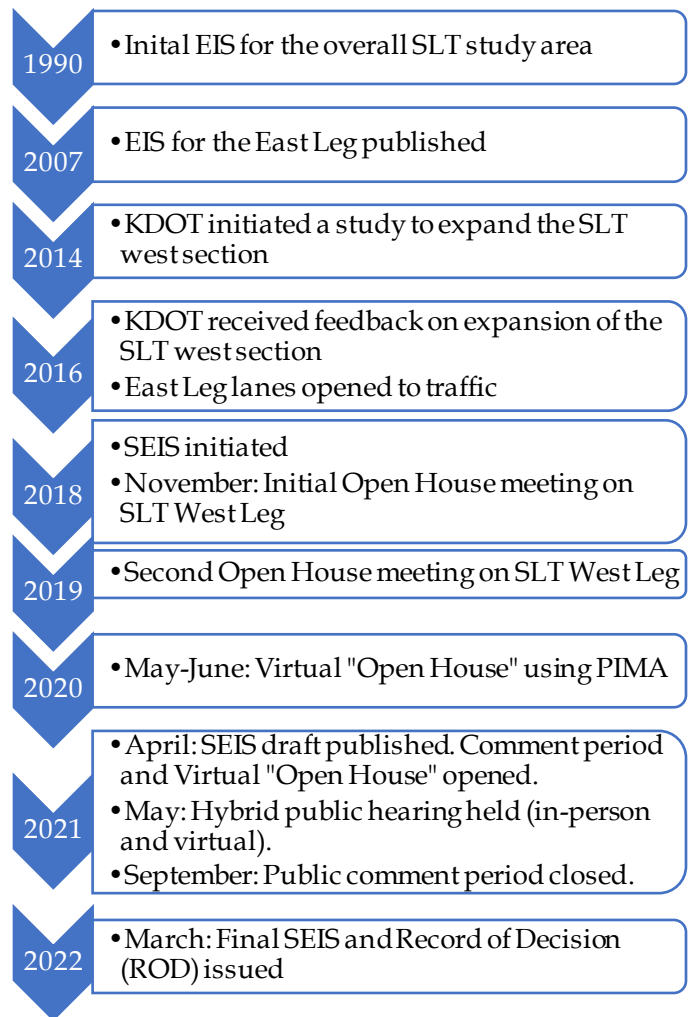


Figure 1. Map of the SLT project SEIS study area (yellow). Source: KDOT.





Project-Specific VPI Approach

KDOT's SLT West Leg team, in collaboration with FHWA Division and Headquarters staff, included VPI considerations in its project-specific public involvement plan (PIP) update in December 2018. The SLT West Leg project team adjusted elements of the PIP to provide a variety of virtual engagement opportunities to stakeholders.

In May 2021, KDOT held a two-day SLT West Leg project hybrid public hearing that included both in-person and virtual components. KDOT also held a Virtual "Open House" from April to September 2021 to allow the public to view materials and provide feedback for the entirety of the comment period.

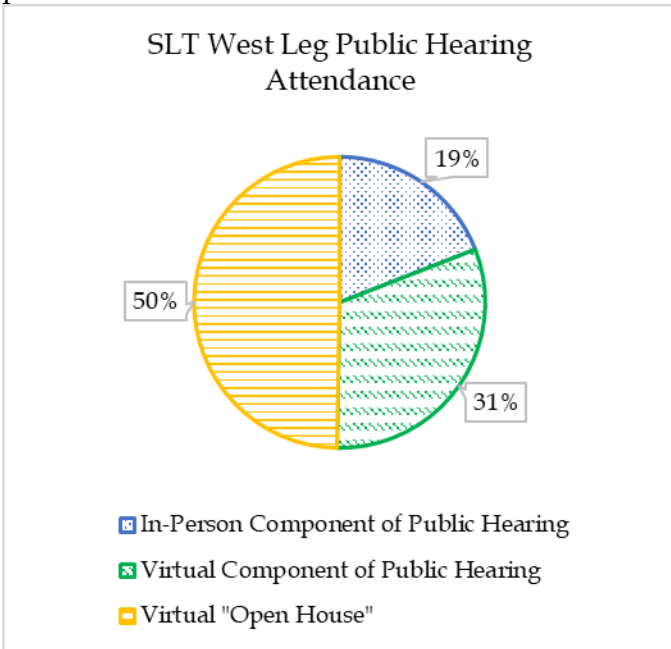


Figure 2. Pie chart comparing attendance at the hybrid public hearing and Virtual "Open House."

The virtual component of the public hearing took place on May 25, 2021, and the in-person component took place on May 26, 2021. A total of 173 people attended the hybrid hearing or participated in the Virtual "Open House": 33 people attended the in-person component of the hearing; 54 attended the virtual component; and 86 attended the Virtual "Open House."

KDOT also recorded and posted the live component of the in-person public hearing on [KDOT's video sharing channel](#).

The SLT West Leg project team used the Public Information Management Application (PIMA), developed by the Iowa DOT, as a registration and comment collection platform for the hybrid public hearing (virtual and in-person components) and the Virtual "Open House." KDOT also hosted the virtual component of the public hearing using PIMA. At the in-person component of the public hearing, attendees were required to create accounts or log in to PIMA on their personal smartphones or on KDOT computers and tablets, which allowed the SLT West Leg project team to capture demographic data and record comments and questions submitted through the application. In-person meeting participants also provided live verbal input, which KDOT staff logged manually in PIMA.

Members of the public also submitted comments through a SLT West Leg project website; a dedicated project email address; drop-in centers (kiosks and display boards at the Youth Sports Complex, Aquatics Center, and other community centers in Lawrence); and two online surveys.

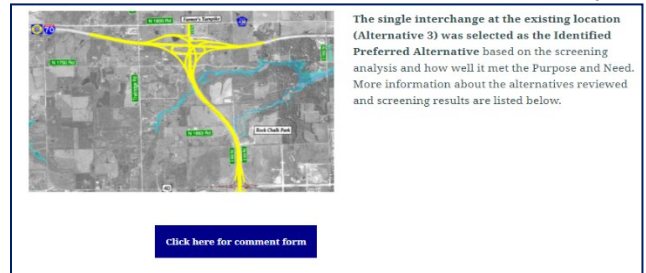


Figure 3. Screenshot of the SLT Virtual "Open House." The blue "Click here for comment form" button appeared at multiple points throughout the interactive online presentation. Source: KDOT.

KDOT publicized the SLT West Leg project through an extensive marketing effort and offered multiple opportunities for the public to provide feedback. Staff sent five electronic notices to a SLT West Leg project mailing list of more than 1,000 residents and stakeholders starting three weeks in advance and followed up with weekly reminders prior to the public hearing. The team also sent two email notices to advertise an extension of the comment period and a reminder of its conclusion.

In addition, KDOT ran two advertisements two weeks before the hearing in the city newspaper; posted flyers and set up display boards at six public facilities in Lawrence; placed announcements in area resident newsletters; and used a dynamic message board along the existing SLT corridor to advertise the in-person component of the public hearing. Staff also posted meeting information and links to project information on the [project website](#); ran advertisements in the city's online newspaper; published on a community website and posted on KDOT and City of Lawrence social media pages.

Further, the SLT West Leg project team convened an advisory board as a part of the KDOT SLT West Leg PIP. Board members provided detailed feedback before public meetings as well as during the public hearing and forwarded project and public hearing information to constituents. The advisory board was composed of representatives from businesses and organizations near the project area, the Lawrence-Douglas County metropolitan planning organization, and other city and county agencies.



Challenges

Prior to the SLT West Leg project, KDOT had not used VPI strategies as part of the NEPA process.

Implementing VPI strategies on a large project was daunting; however, KDOT leveraged its consultant's experience using VPI on other NEPA projects to identify effective VPI strategies for the SLT West Leg project.

KDOT held its first wholly Virtual "Open House" in May 2020, and the SLT West Leg project team received feedback that many people were not aware of it, although information on the SLT West Leg was heavily marketed through the advisory board, stakeholder list, and newspaper articles. In response to this feedback, KDOT extended its first Virtual "Open House" by one week.

With a goal of reaching more people during promotion of the hybrid public hearing in May 2021, the project team increased outreach activities, such as by adding poster boards at community

centers, posting on social media, and publishing notifications from community sites.

Keeping messaging consistent across multiple platforms when hosting public meetings or hearings was a challenge. To address this, the SLT West Leg project team created one prerecorded video that was played at the hybrid public hearing and posted on the Virtual "Open House" website to provide the same content to all constituents regardless of their chosen engagement platform.

When reviewing written comments submitted through PIMA, the SLT West Leg project team found that these comments were generally more detailed than verbal comments provided. However, the team also found it difficult to understand some PIMA comments without the opportunity to clarify via dialogue. In part, this prompted the SLT West Leg project team to adjust the format for the public hearing to ensure that staff were able to clarify constituent questions through the live components of both the in-person and virtual hearing.



Reaching Underserved Populations

To include underserved populations in the environmental review process, KDOT:

- **Ensured that materials on PIMA were available in Spanish for individuals with limited English proficiency.** Through project demographics review, KDOT found there were Spanish-speaking populations in the study area. The SLT West Leg project team also noted on materials that translation services were available. A QR code on these materials took readers directly to the Spanish-translated PIMA page.
- **Invited students and faculty from Haskell Indian Nations University to sit on the SLT West Leg project advisory board and extended the project comment period deadline.** Since some students had limited access to the internet over the summer, the extension of the comment period provided an opportunity for students to have a voice in the project. As a result of stakeholder concerns, including from Haskell



Indians Nations University, KDOT is reviewing their noise policy.

- **Tailored presentations to address the concerns of specific stakeholder groups impacted by the project.** For example, in 2016, a church located in the project area expressed concerns about changes to corridor access points, the potential for a toll on the new corridor, and the project’s potential impacts on the church. The SLT West Leg project team hosted a meeting at the church to obtain feedback on the project. The project team revisited project plans and took actions to mitigate some of the project’s right-of-way impacts on the church. KDOT staff also invited the church minister to join the project advisory board and added interested churchgoers to the project email list.



Benefits of Virtual Public Hearings and VPI

KDOT believes that using VPI strategies can broaden opportunities available for the public to engage in transportation project planning and project development. KDOT noted that this can result in outreach efforts that reach more diverse populations, as well as improved quality and quantity of submitted comments. KDOT also noted that supplementing a public hearing with a Virtual “Open House” where comments were collected over a period of a few months, rather than a few weeks with in-person public hearings, increased the number of comments received on the project. Additionally, when in-person gatherings were restricted, many members of the public developed an increased comfort level with engaging virtually because of increased use of virtual platforms in everyday life.



Lessons Learned

After the first Virtual “Open House” meeting in May 2020, KDOT sent out a survey to subscribers and posted it on the project website to obtain feedback on the virtual format. Five hundred and sixty people completed the survey, 80 (15 percent) of whom stated that they attended the virtual meeting. The survey results informed some of KDOT’s lessons learned:

- **Agency staff planning virtual meetings and public hearings should extensively market them in advance to ensure broad stakeholder awareness.** Most (79 percent) survey respondents who did not attend the May 2020 Virtual “Open House” meeting claimed they were unaware of the meeting in advance. This prompted the SLT West Leg project team to include additional marketing and outreach efforts ahead of the hybrid public hearing in May 2021.



Figure 4: Attendees at the live, in-person public hearing for SLT on May 26, 2021. Source: KDOT.

- **VPI strategies can make it more convenient for the public to provide input on projects and engage in the NEPA process.** Because people can participate in the process when and where they would like to use VPI strategies, this can also help agency staff obtain more diverse perspectives. KDOT noted that the average age of meeting participants was lower for the virtual events than the in-person events, indicating that KDOT reached a younger demographic that does not usually attend in-person meetings. The follow-up survey showed that 93 percent of respondents who attended the Virtual “Open House” would attend another virtual public meeting. Seventy percent of all survey respondents said they preferred a virtual format.
- **KDOT found that comments provided through virtual means were typically more detailed than verbal comments.** Additionally, PIMA automatically logged comments. This made it easier for KDOT staff to review and synthesize comments, since they did not first have to transcribe verbal comments.

- **Project teams should send direct meeting links to stakeholders on the day of the event to avoid technological issues.** KDOT noted that barriers to virtual meeting attendance might include situations where constituents have trouble pre-registering or encounter other technological issues when logging into a meeting. Sending registered participants, a direct meeting link may help attendees join a meeting more easily with “one click.”

KDOT issued a Final SEIS and ROD in March 2022. Final design is underway, and construction is expected to begin in 2024.

Moving forward, KDOT plans to leverage the experience gained using VPI strategies on the SLT West Leg project into future public engagement efforts.



Next Steps

The comment period for the SLT West Leg project closed on September 30, 2021. FHWA and

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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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