



# Virtual Public Involvement Initiative

Learn About

# Virtual Town Halls



## What are Virtual Town Halls?

Public meetings are an essential part of the transportation planning and project development process. They provide a forum for stakeholders to learn about projects and investments, ask questions and interact with agency staff, and provide opinions and input on the local or regional transportation network.

With careful planning, face-to-face meetings can bring together diverse groups of stakeholders. They can elicit valuable feedback for staff and build support for transportation projects. However, public meetings require a great deal of time, labor, and funding to design, promote, and facilitate. What's more, stakeholders with busy schedules may find it burdensome to travel to a public meeting venue on a specific date and time.

Virtual town halls or virtual public meetings offer stakeholders a way to take part in the planning process without traveling to a meeting location, such as a school or conference center. Stakeholders may join the meeting via teleconference, or by using online meeting software they access from their own computers or from a computer available in public locations, like a local library. In some formats, attendees at virtual town halls can engage in live polling and other dynamic information-sharing, or listen to a simulcast in a language other than English.



## VPI in Practice

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency used a virtual town hall meeting to discuss its FY 2019 and 2020 budget. The online meeting helped to improve participation and elicit useful project feedback.

*Image courtesy of San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency*

SFMTA Online Budget Townhall



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### Can Virtual Town Halls Help My Agency?

Engaging with stakeholders during the transportation planning and project development process is not only required, it's the right thing to do for the public good. Community members want to understand how tax dollars are being invested, and they have unique perspectives and insights about the places they live, work, and visit.

Virtual town halls can bridge the gap between wanting to attend an in-person public meeting and the constraints that stand in the way. Using virtual town halls can bolster participation, make projects better, and smooth the project delivery process.

Agencies can save time and money by employing readily-available approaches, like teleconferencing, and can reach populations with low mobility, limited English proficiency, and other barriers that may reduce in-person attendance.



### How Can My Agency Start Hosting Virtual Town Halls?

It's simple to get started hosting virtual town halls. Consider adding a teleconference option to an in-person meeting and sharing the toll-free call-in number in meeting advertisements. Some teleconference services provide technical support to manage calls with a large number of participants.

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) recently opted to use online public meetings as a complement to traditional town halls for their budget process. The agency was in search of new avenues to increase engagement on

discussions related to the budget and was interested in leveraging existing resources to make meetings more accessible to the public.

The SFMTA was fortunate to be able to work alongside the production staff at San Francisco Government TV (SFGOVTV) in order to develop the content for the meeting and to produce a multi-cast approach as the meeting was broadcast on YouTube, SFGOVTV, and Facebook Live. Throughout the meeting, the agency accepted questions from participants in real-time through Facebook, Twitter and by e-mail. By offering various opportunities for engagement, the agency was able to gather feedback from a more diverse set of participants.

In preparation for the event, the agency promoted the online meeting using various social media channels and through its budget project web page, which offered a package of opportunities designed to generate feedback. In the future, SFMTA hopes to expand its online meetings offerings beyond discussions on the budget.

### CONTACT A COLLEAGUE

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### TAKE NOTE...

- Teleconferences and online meetings bring more people to the virtual table
- Virtual hearings may have legislative requirements
- Online town halls can be used to share graphics, maps, and other visual aids
- Virtual public hearings can save time and money while improving meeting effectiveness



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