

Department of Administration
STATE PLANNING COUNCIL
Division of Statewide Planning
One Capitol Hill
Providence, RI 02908-5870

Re: Comments on the draft Public Participation Plan 2024 Limited Update (“Plan”)

To Whom It May Concern:

We greatly appreciate the time and work you have committed to drafting this Plan. From the perspective of the goals and objectives to be achieved, the Plan appears comprehensive in form. However, we believe the following suggested changes and comments will enhance the substance the State Planning Council (SPC) as well as the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) will obtain from implementation of the Plan; and bring the Plan in better alignment with Rhode Island State and Federal law.

1. Information Dissemination.

The Plan sets forth 10 public information dissemination methods and materials (page 16 – page 19 of the Plan). In our opinion, one of the keys to success of these methods revolves around the Division of Statewide Planning Website (“Website”). Currently, the Website is a comprehensive, intuitive tool that contains a wealth of detailed information. However, there are some specific improvements that would substantially improve its utility not only for the public using the Website but for the Division of Statewide Planning as well. As described, many of the dissemination methods are dependent on building and maintaining extensive lists of contacts – databases – that can be seamlessly deployed via the Website to meet the public dissemination requirements. However, our review of the Plan and the Website does not indicate how the Website is effectively utilized to achieve this objective. For instance, with respect to Direct Mail or Email (page 16), the Plan states that the Division maintains an extensive list of contacts but does not explain how it gathers these contacts. The Plan does mention the use of sign-in sheets at public meetings and events, the dissemination of information to a multitude of state and municipal offices, and the Website refers its users to call a person at the Division to request specific information. This information collection scheme offers limited scope and applicability. By adding relatively simple functionality to the Website, a person using the Website could be quickly and unobtrusively prompted to register their email on the Website if they would like to receive all the information and notices published by the Division or it could be tailored to provide a menu of choices that a user could select if the user only wanted select information. If a person does not have an email, the person could register their mailing address if they would like to receive direct mailings from the Division, which such information would be captured by the Website database.

In this regard, if the Division develops or contracts with a social media platform and/or networking websites, the platforms could easily direct viewers to register directly to receive

information and notices published by the Division, while also promoting this information in a more accessible and visual manner. The Website could similarly notify a user of these social media platforms and invite them to participate.

Further, in our opinion, virtual meeting accessibility represents another pillar of successfully supporting the expansion of public participation. Our engagement in public meetings of the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) and State Planning Council (SPC) over the past year has seen inconsistent access to virtual viewing or participation. The ability of members of the public to both view a meeting from work or home and also provide public comment virtually is an important way to address barriers to transportation, childcare, or work-life conflicts. The integration of closed captioning and live translation via a platform like Zoom also offers an entry point for audiences that may be hard-of-hearing or non-English speaking.

2. Targeted Consultation

It is encouraging to see that the Plan contains four pages devoted to addressing challenges related to environmental justice populations and other traditionally underserved peoples. In this regard, page 28 of the Plan specifically notes that “The Division will then seek out and contact organizations and community leaders with which it has or can build a working relationship to further engage the wider population of these underserved populations”. Those communities that are not yet at the table are consumers of transportation services who are certainly impacted by the decisions passed down from the Division’s planning processes. We note that there are many active advocacy organizations (such as the ones signing onto these comments) ready and willing to assist the Division in reaching out to these organizations and community leaders to ensure there is a built-in environmental justice equity lens to the transportation planning processes discussed by the Plan.

Fostering relationships with organizations that serve environmental justice and other traditionally underserved communities will help relate the Division’s transportation planning projects to the priorities of those organizations and encourage participation in advisory committees, surveys, or other opportunities such as focus groups. Trainings may also be offered as a resource to learn about timely transportation issues, identify and provide valuable input on state transportation concerns and priorities, and build relationships with new potential community partners/leaders. For all such participation activities, we would like to note the importance of compensating individuals for their targeted consultation, as well as the consideration of providing such basic amenities as food, childcare, and transportation to ensure the maximum inclusiveness of stakeholders.

As advocates, we are interested in knowing more about the membership and activities of the Public Participation Task Force and success in implementing public outreach strategies. In our opinion, this body should play a central advisory role in all aspects of information dissemination and targeted consultation on behalf of both the State Planning Council (SPC) and the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC). We encourage collaboration with the environmental justice work and outreach of other state agencies, including efforts by the Executive Climate

Change Coordinating Council (EC4) to establish an Environmental Justice Advisory Board and to train agency staff on racial equity.

3. General Participation

The Division notes that the primary method to obtain public input is through public meetings. However, in order to allow the greatest opportunity for attendance by the public and interested groups, we urge the Division to devote additional efforts to notice regularly scheduled meetings. Current methods include the Secretary of State's Open Meetings Portal and the physical posting at the Department of Administration building and bulletin board at the Division of Statewide Planning's office. Additional methods may include notifying targeted email lists, social media posts/ads and cross-promotion in the e-newsletters and platforms of partner or community organizations. The Website generated database could easily distribute notices of meetings and events to the public and send them notices with options to join these meetings and events electronically through the link included in the electronic notice. Leveraging graphics and visualizations regarding the topics to be discussed at the public meetings is highly encouraged.

As noted above, we also suggest that the Division regularly use technology such as Zoom or Teams to allow a larger audience to electronically engage in public events. This technology should allow the viewing public to make specific comments and generate responses (all of which could be kept as part of the record of the meeting, along with the number and names of people participating electronically) and electronically participate in the surveys that are made available to people publicly appearing at meetings and events. In addition to virtual meeting accessibility, in-person amenities such as food and childcare will also support broader participation.

As advocates, we believe that the leadership of the Division, SPC and TAC may foster a more welcoming culture for members of the public at public meetings. For example, the SPC and TAC could host open sessions for the half hour before a public meeting to encourage interaction and dialogue between committee members and members of the public. Further, we encourage the acceptance of public comments on any topic, both at the start and end of public meetings.

4. Metrics:

As indicated on page 36 of the Plan: "Statewide Planning will utilize the three evaluation methods outlined below to measure the level of success of the public outreach component of various projects and ensure compliance with state and federal agency regulations". However, based on our reading of the Plan, we notice only two methods – Annual Review and Performance Measures. In this regard, it appears that the results of the Annual Review are dependent on the Performance Measures selected on pages 37 and 38 of the Plan.

Further, annual evaluation reports and performance measures must be made publicly available. The Plan fails to provide baseline data or transparency around the current state of public participation, such as meeting attendance, public comments provided (spoken, written or electronic), or the public participation activities actually leveraged in recent years. How many of the past year's meetings were ADA accessible, were convenient to operational public transit or alternative transportation, or provided virtual participation? Were meetings spread across the

state and/or hosted in partnership with community organizations? How many valid email addresses are currently notified of the Division's public meetings? Is there a lack of demographic balance at public meetings? The results of these and other listed performance measures should be tabulated and published in an easily identified portion of the Website as part of the Annual Report on an on-going basis. An understanding of the effectiveness of current public participation activities is necessary to then improve public engagement and outreach.

5. Commitment to Robust Engagement and Outreach for Upcoming LRTP and STIP

Due to the critical importance of both the State's Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) and the State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP), the Division of Statewide Planning must go beyond the minimum public participation components. Despite describing engagement and outreach for these two key transportation documents as extensive, the Division only commits to consideration of some of the participation methods for use in future updates of the LRTP and STIP. As advocates, we would like to see a tangible and transparent commitment to the information dissemination, targeted consultation, and general participation strategies outlined in this plan for the upcoming update to the LRTP and the solicitation of project proposals, public review, and adoption of the STIP. Rather than describing past efforts, requirements, and possible methods, the Division should specifically describe the platforms for information dissemination and intended timeline and methods for consultation and participation by a wide range of stakeholders.

6. Integration of Act on Climate into Transportation Planning

The transportation sector is critical to the state of Rhode Island meeting its legally obligated mandates under the Act on Climate. As part of meeting the public participation requirements for transportation projects, we recommend that the goals and objectives of the Plan include consideration and analysis of how the state's transportation projects meet the state's mandated goals to reduce emissions, strengthen the resilience of communities and infrastructure, and prepare for the effects of climate change as set forth in the AOC. This must include a process where the interests of people from populations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and at risk of pollution, displacement, energy burden, and cost are included in the Plan, including an equitable transition to climate compliance for environmental justice populations and redressing past environmental and public health inequities.

Further, the Plan should set forth an effective mechanism for Rhode Island to track progress towards its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction targets and incorporate measures into a performance-based planning process used to determine how to invest federal funds. Along these lines, it is imperative that metrics be developed to show what elements of the LRTP are being implemented and what is not, as well as GHG Performance Measures for each funded element of the STIP. These results need to be easily publicly available as soon as they are available.

Thank you for your consideration of these changes and comments to the draft Public Participation Plan 2024 Limited Update.

Sincerely,

Richard Stang, Conservation Law Foundation

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