

# REGIONAL PLANNING PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PLAN

## 2021



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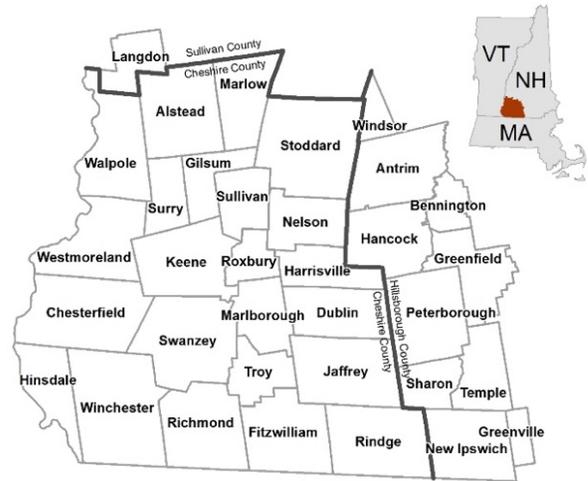
## Introduction

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This Public Involvement Plan establishes guidance by which the Southwest Region Planning Commission (SWRPC) ensures effective public involvement in the regional planning process. SWRPC recognizes the value of public involvement as a democratic process that increases public awareness, contributes to information gathering on local needs and concerns, and benefits the overall decision-making process.



*SWRPC Staff host a community meeting at a local school.*



*The Southwest Region of New Hampshire.*

Additionally, This Plan reflects best practices and ensures the Commission’s due diligence towards meeting the statutory requirements as set forth in the latest Federal and State legislation (see Attachment A).

SWRPC provides local assistance on planning issues to member municipalities. In addition, SWRPC is a public planning agency that responds to statutory requirements, contractual obligations of several State agencies, and the needs of member communities. First and foremost, SWRPC responds to the needs of member communities as identified by State law.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> New Hampshire Revised Statutes Annotated (RSA), "Title III: Towns, Cities, Village Districts, and Unincorporated Places." Chapter 36: Regional Planning Commissions. <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/iii/36/36-mrg.htm>

SWRPC strives to have strong public engagement in its planning activities. In the context of this Public Involvement Plan, the public is identified as those with an interest in community development outcomes in the 34 towns that comprise the Southwest Region of New Hampshire. The public includes:

- All residents regardless of their race, color, national origin, sex, age or disability;
- All owners of property or business interests; and
- All organizations representing the above mentioned, not to exclude elected representatives or agents thereof.



*An open house held to gather public input on a rail trail planning initiative.*

The Public Involvement Plan applies to all planning activities conducted by SWRPC.<sup>2</sup> These regional planning activities are often supported by Federal and State funds and include:

**POLICY** - A policy is a decision-making process that outlines the priorities for the expenditure of state and federal funds. Policy recommendations are typically incorporated in various SWRPC plans and documents that are developed in conjunction with SWRPC's Board of Directors and/or its established advisory committees.

**PLANS AND STUDIES** - Plans and studies are used to identify regional issues and possible solutions. This process requires the collection of data, analysis and presentation of the results. Planning studies are conducted by SWRPC staff often with the aid of an oversight body such as an advisory committee or working group.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete description of planning activities conducted by SWRPC, please refer to SWRPC's website at: <http://swrpc.org/programs-services/>.

**PROJECT DEVELOPMENT** - Project development is the process by which the scope, limits, design, and other developmental aspects of a project are determined. SWRPC is involved in this process through convening, facilitating, advising, and assisting its local, state and federal partners.

**PROGRAMS** - SWRPC has a diverse work program consisting of seven major program areas: Local Planning, Natural Resources, Community and Economic Development, Emergency Management Planning, Geographic Information Systems, Public Health, and Transportation. SWRPC programs encompass a wide range of activities including, but not limited to, community master planning, site plan review, capital improvement planning, subdivision reviews, ordinance preparation, interpretation of state and local planning requirements, grant administration, cartographic support, geographic information system (GIS) applications, and corridor planning. These programs involve participation of four standing advisory committees, ad hoc committees and working groups, and the Board of Directors. The four standing advisory committees are the Brownfields Advisory Committee, Economic Development Advisory Committee, Energy and Natural Resources Advisory Committee, and Transportation Advisory Committee.



*SWRPC Commission meeting*

## **Policy, Goals and Principles of the Public Involvement Plan**

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### **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT POLICY**

The policy of the Public Involvement Plan is to provide all interested and potentially affected individuals, businesses and community representatives the opportunity to participate in the regional planning decision-making process regardless of their race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, creed, marital status, familial status, sexual identity, or sexual orientation. Additionally, the public should have the ability to provide comments, insight and information pertinent to the subject on draft documents, policies and programs prior to their adoption.

## GOALS

The main goal of the Public Involvement Plan is to pro-actively seek public involvement in order to assure that the outcome of regional planning activities accurately reflect the needs and concerns of the residents of Southwest New Hampshire. Four other primary goals of this process are:

- To encourage and ensure full and fair participation by all potentially affected persons in the decision-making process;
- To incorporate the needs and concerns of the public into the regional planning process;
- To identify and address disproportionately high and adverse health, environmental, social, and economic effects of programs, policies and activities to the public, including minority and/or low-income populations; and
- To prevent the denial of, reduction of, or significant delay in the receipt of program benefits to disproportionately affected groups, including minority and/or low-income populations.

## PRINCIPLES OF THE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PLAN

The following principles serve as a guide to support the goals identified above:

**OUTREACH AND EDUCATION** - The planning process should be inclusive, accessible and understandable to the general public.

- Information should be presented in a *clear and readable manner*;
- Information should be presented in a manner that *educates the public*;
- Information should be presented in a clear, concise manner using *graphics and visual aids* as may be beneficial;
- Documents should be made available at a *public place* such as the SWRPC office; and,
- Documents should also be made available *electronically* via the SWRPC website and disseminated via the internet.

**ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PUBLIC** - The public should have the opportunity to participate and be engaged in the decision-making process.

- Meetings should be held in *conveniently accessible* locations at opportune times of the day;
- The public should receive *adequate notice* as to meetings and the availability of information;
- The public should be afforded adequate opportunities to *comment* on planning material (e.g. updates to plans) for a period of at least 30 days from posting of a notice, unless stated otherwise by applicable law; and,
- Public testimony and input should be recorded and filed.

**CONSIDERATION BY DECISION MAKERS** - Public comments and concerns should be adequately considered by SWRPC staff, relevant advisory committees and/or the Board of Directors.

- The information collected through the Public Involvement Process should be presented by staff to relevant advisory committees, working groups and/or the Board of Directors;
- Written and oral comments should be incorporated as an appendix to plans and documents and filed at the SWRPC office;
- Comments which warrant immediate attention, such as typographical or factual mistakes should be made by staff;

- Comments and suggestions as to the contents of the document, policy decision, or other content should be reviewed by staff and the relevant advisory committee and/or the Board of Directors and addressed as appropriate; and
- SWRPC staff will attempt to respond to all comments received via writing, including e-mails, acknowledging receipt and a brief summary of how it has been considered.

**EMPLOYEE TRAINING** - SWRPC staff should be adequately prepared to facilitate effective public involvement.

- SWRPC staff should regularly review the SWRPC Public Involvement Plan and apply the principles and best practices contained in the document toward planning activities.
- SWRPC should support public involvement training and continuing education opportunities for its staff including training in communications, facilitation, conflict management, visualization strategies, and other appropriate skill development opportunities.

## Identification of Barriers to Involvement

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In order to comply with public involvement statutes (see Attachment A), SWRPC staff will attempt to identify and mitigate the barriers which might currently prevent segments of the Region’s population from participating in the regional planning decision-making process.

Racial minorities, individuals of lower income, residents with disabilities, certain age groups, and those with low-literacy or limited English proficiency are less likely to participate in the public process due to socioeconomic and physical barriers. The following methods will be used to identify these populations as well as the barriers which prevent their effective involvement in the decision-making process:

### IDENTIFYING AND ENGAGING DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS

As a matter of general practice, SWRPC staff critically examines how planning projects and initiatives could impact different segments of the population, giving special consideration to disadvantaged and historically marginalized groups. Critical analysis often relies in part on secondary data sources, such as the U.S. Census, to understand in broad terms the size and location of different population groups. Staff also solicit the input of community partners who work with traditionally disenfranchised groups in order to better understand how planning issues could affect their daily lived experience. After giving consideration to who may be affected by a particular planning project, initiative, or topic, next steps often entail examining whose voice is represented in the planning process and whose is missing. After assessing which groups may be underrepresented in the planning process, staff can take steps to actively solicit the perspective of those populations.

In order to identify and reduce barriers to participation, SWRPC frequently enlists the help of partner organizations who work on a daily basis with traditionally marginalized groups. These organizations may include social service agencies, community non-profits, municipal committees, local advocacy groups, faith-based organizations, and others. These community partners play a vital role in helping SWRPC reach disadvantaged populations and to incorporate their perspectives into planning projects. Engaging groups typically excluded from public processes can sometimes require long-term relationship building and a sense of trust that can’t be established in the short-term. SWRPC recognizes when its partners have already built these relationships with marginalized groups and can act as a liaison to include them in the planning process.

Although the measures needed will depend on the particular circumstances and group(s) in question, certain basic principles are helpful to keep in my mind when considering how to overcome barriers to participation. For example, successfully engaging disadvantaged populations can often mean *going to them* rather than expecting them *to come to you*. Meeting with disadvantaged groups at locations that they already tend to frequent increases the convenience of participating and helps ensure that discussion and other engagement activities occur in a familiar environment. Again, partner organization can play a critical role in helping SWRPC staff identify optimal locations for engagement.

## MINORITY POPULATIONS

In order to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act requirements, SWRPC will attempt to identify and pro-actively seek the input from minority individuals in the Region. Approximately 5% of the population of Southwest New Hampshire *do not* describe themselves as being ‘white alone’. This percentage is far below the national average of 27.5%.<sup>3</sup>

Minority populations may feel out of place, uncomfortable or otherwise unwelcome to participate in a community discussion. These barriers could be overcome through thoughtful design and distribution of public notices and a meeting facilitator who consciously welcomes and involves minority individuals.

## LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS AND INDIVIDUALS

In order to comply with Environmental Justice provisions, SWRPC will attempt to identify and pro-actively engage input from low-income individuals. An individual or household is classified as low-income if their income, adjusted for family size, is 150% or less of the federal poverty line.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 20.8% of the population within the Southwest Region of New Hampshire falls within this category.<sup>5</sup>

Low-income individuals may have difficulty in attending meetings due to incompatible work schedules and obtaining transportation or childcare. Attempts should be made to provide meeting opportunities that mitigate these barriers. Please refer to page 8 of this document for more information on public meetings.

## THOSE REQUIRING ACCOMMODATIONS

In order to comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provisions, SWRPC will attempt to solicit and accommodate input from individuals with physical and/or mental impairments, including those brought about by advanced age. While data on aging is easily available, disability data is more difficult to obtain due to medical privacy issues. However, SWRPC staff is aware of the importance of participation of this group of individuals through work with area non-profits.

Barriers to participation from this group are typically physical in nature. Mobility impairments represent a common barrier to participation. Sensory impairments such as hearing and vision loss should also be addressed through alternative modes of communication. Please refer to



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<sup>3</sup> 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, DP05.

<sup>4</sup> Heggeness, Misty L. and Charles Hokayem. "Life on the Edge: Living Near Poverty in the United States, 1966-2011." *United States Census Bureau*. February 2013 <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/publications/WP2013-02.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, DP03. This figure does not include the Town of Langdon due to its high margin of error.

page 8 of this document for more information on public meetings and how ADA compliance is addressed in venue location.

## LOW-LITERACY AND LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY POPULATIONS

In addition to the above-mentioned barriers to effective public participation, language is perhaps the biggest impediment to communication between the public and decision makers. Language barriers include low-literacy levels (closely correlated to low-income) and limited English proficiency of minority and immigrant populations.

Low-literacy is defined as less than a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading and comprehension level.<sup>6</sup> While data regarding low-literacy is not available for the Region, Census data shows that 6.2 % of the Region’s residents who are 25 years and older have an educational attainment level below a high-school diploma and an additional 30.1% have attained a high school diploma or equivalent.<sup>7</sup> An individual’s reading level is typically 3 to 5 grades lower than their highest educational attainment.<sup>8</sup>

The Region has approximately 303 individuals that have some difficulty with English.<sup>9</sup> This is equivalent to approximately 0.3% of all people in the Region. The Census Bureau categorizes these persons as “linguistically isolated.” The estimated number of individuals in the Region with some difficulty with English has doubled over the past 5 years.

Federal law prohibits national origin discrimination and requires meaningful access to limited English proficiency persons in federal and federally assisted programs and activities. Executive Order 13166, *Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency* requires recipients of Federal funds to examine the services they provide, identify any need for services to those with limited English proficiency, and develop and implement a system to provide those services so limited English proficiency persons can have meaningful access to them (see Attachment A).



The policy of SWRPC is to take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access to limited English proficiency individuals. The policy is to make a good faith effort to find translation resources, whether they are needed to facilitate engagement at a public meeting or assist with reading comprehension.

In order to meet recent federal requirements in accommodating members of the public with limited English proficiency, SWRPC will provide the following accommodations:

- Develop a list of SWRPC staff proficiency beyond English to be maintained by the organization.

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<sup>6</sup> Federal Highway Administration, "How to Engage Low-Literacy and Limited-English-Proficiency Populations in Transportation Decisionmaking." *What Do Low Literacy and Limited English Proficiency Mean?* Updated 6/28/2017 [https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/publications/low\\_limited/lowlim04.cfm](https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/publications/low_limited/lowlim04.cfm)

<sup>7</sup> 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, DP02.

<sup>8</sup> Glassman, Penny. "Health Literacy." *National Network of Libraries of Medicine*. June 2013 <https://nmlm.gov/outreach/consumer/hlthlit.html>

<sup>9</sup>American Community Survey 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates, 1602.

- Seek language services through local community resources such as Keene State College. SWRPC will attempt to match such services to particular needs of individuals attempting to effectively participate in the planning process.
- If local organizations are unable to provide such assistance for individuals with limited English proficiency, the following list of possible resources may be considered:
  - New Hampshire’s Department of Education Directory of NH Translators (603) 271-3494 or (800) 735-2964 or <https://www.education.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt326/files/inline-documents/2020/translators-alphabetical.pdf>
  - Language Bank (603) 224-8111 or (844) 579-0610 or <https://www.thelanguagebank.org/> for on-site interpretation assistance
  - Language Line (800) 752-6096 or <https://www.language.com/contact-language-line-solutions>
- In cases where interpretation is needed for only written materials, Google’s online foreign language translation tool may be helpful and can be accessed on the Internet at <https://translate.google.com/>.

SWRPC will attempt to accommodate those with low-English proficiency on an as-needed basis. SWRPC staff will strive to communicate plans, notices and policies to anyone who initiates contact. If a language barrier does arise, SWRPC will make efforts to find suitable resources to bridge the language gap.

## Proactive Methods of Public Involvement

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### MEETING VENUES

SWRPC will make reasonable attempts to hold public meetings in centrally located venues easily accessed by residents of the region. Meeting rooms should be ADA accessible and offer adequate parking and ADA accessible bathrooms.



*Southwest Region Planning Commission offices in Keene, NH.*

Up until March 2020 with the onset of the Covid-19 Virus, SWRPC routinely hosted public meetings at its office located at 37 Ashuelot Street in Keene. This location is centrally located within the context of Southwest New Hampshire and is ADA accessible. Since the pandemic, meetings were switched to virtual meetings, allowing for participants to attend via their computers from home or office and thereby increasing accessibility. A few drawbacks to virtual meetings is poor internet service in some areas and the outreach

needed to provide assistance to those unfamiliar with how to use this form of meeting participation. More information on virtual meetings can be found on page 12.

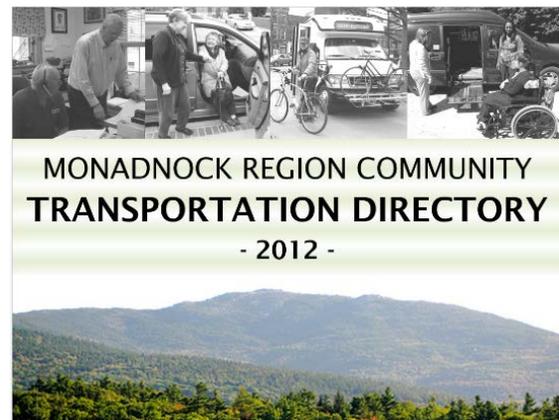
In situations where meetings are sub-regional or local in scope, SWRPC has a number of identified meeting locations throughout the Region to facilitate enhanced access to the local population. As a municipal member organization, SWRPC has the flexibility of working with communities in the Region to meet in town-owned facilities or other local community institutions.



*Open house event hosted at a local library. Project materials were put on display a week in advance of the meeting in order to provide an avenue for individuals to learn more about the project and provide comment even if they weren't able to attend the open house itself.*

## **TRANSPORTATION FOR NON-DRIVERS**

SWRPC has developed the Southwest Region Community Transportation Directory as a resource to connect interested stakeholders with limited mobility to community transportation services including taxis, ridesharing services, volunteer driver services, and other available community transportation agencies.



## **PROJECT SPECIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEES**

From time to time, SWRPC forms ad hoc committees and work groups to gain public input for the purposes of aiding in the development of specific planning projects. These committees and work groups are made up of stakeholders focused on a particular issue and/or project or program. All meetings are open to the public. These meetings should also be held close to the communities they affect if applicable and as may be accommodated.

SWRPC also has standing advisory committee meetings which represent key decision-making points in the planning process. Standing advisory committees include:

- Brownfields Advisory Committee

- Economic Development Advisory Committee
- Energy and Natural Resources Advisory Committee
- Transportation Advisory Committee



*The Economic Development Advisory Committee utilizes the SWRPC's conference room for meetings.*

SWRPC's Board of Directors and advisory committee membership will strive to reflect the demographic make-up of the region. Project-specific public participation should be designed and documented as appropriate.

## **NOTIFICATION**

Public notices should be distributed via the SWRPC website, and SWRPC electronic and printed newsletters among other methods. Notifications should be posted at least 24 hours prior to the meeting, and should include the date, time and location of the meeting. Additional methods of public notice such as press releases and meeting announcements are used in many instances.

Public notifications and notices should include directions to the venue and contact information to request assistance regarding special accommodations due to a disability or language barrier.

## **NON-SWRPC PUBLIC MEETINGS**

SWRPC, on occasion, aids state agencies and others in hosting public meetings for the region. In these cases, SWRPC will aid in advertising these meetings and abide by the principles included in this Public Involvement Plan.

## **DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT METHODS**

In addition to hosting in-person meetings, SWRPC makes a concerted effort to engage stakeholders and members of the general public via online channels, some of which are summarized below.

### **SWRPC Website**

As of Spring 2021, SWRPC is in the final stages of redesigning its website in order to more effectively communicate with its municipal stakeholders, partner organizations and members of the general public. New or enhanced functions of the updated site include:

- **IMPROVED SITE HIERARCHY** - The site benefits from a more intuitive organizational structure, making it easier for users to find the information they need.
- **A VISUALLY ENGAGING DESIGN** - The website design features photos, maps and other graphics.
- **A MOBILE RESPONSIVE DESIGN** - Today, people are increasingly accessing the internet using a variety of devices, including tablets and smartphones. The website will adjust the display of content depending on the type of device being used.
- **INTEGRATION WITH SOCIAL MEDIA** - Site visitors are able to access the SWRPC Facebook page from the site. They also have the capability to easily “share” website content on social media platforms, enhancing SWRPC’s ability to market meetings/events, promote projects and engage with community members on planning-related issues.
- **A BLOG/NEWS FEED** - A blog/news feed is featured prominently on the homepage, providing improved capability to highlight recent or upcoming activities or other newsworthy items that might benefit our stakeholders. The blog/news feed also provides a potential format for serializing reports or studies into consumable, easy to understand formats that may be more approachable to a wider audience. Blog posts are easily shareable on social media, providing a mechanism for reaching stakeholders who may be unfamiliar with the work of SWRPC or who may be less likely to engage with more traditional planning studies or reports. Since the blog/news feed is searchable by category and key word, it serves as a publicly-accessible record of past newsworthy planning items.
- **AUTOMATED TRANSLATION** - The site includes a Google Translate widget, allowing for machine-generated translation of website content into a number of languages.
- **SITE-WIDE SEARCH** - A search menu is featured prominently on the top menu bar across the website.
- **A RESOURCE LIBRARY** - The site includes a resource library that can be filtered by year, keyword, or category, making it easy to find past meeting materials, documents and reports.
- **INTERACTIVE DATA TABLES** - One key role that SWRPC plays in the region is providing constituents with accurate and up-to-date data on a wide range of planning-related issues. The website allows for the creation of online, interactive data tables that enable users to filter and sort information according to their particular interests. Data tables can also be visualized using a variety of interactive charts, providing an additional tool for presenting information in a way that’s easy to interpret.
- **ENHANCED CALENDAR FUNCTIONALITY** - A calendar of upcoming meetings and events is featured prominently on the homepage. Where applicable, meeting materials (e.g. agendas, minutes) are posted with calendar entries. In addition to informing stakeholders about upcoming events, the calendar serves as a searchable repository of past events and related materials, enhancing the transparency of SWRPC activities.
- **IMPROVED ACCESSIBILITY** - The website is compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0.<sup>10</sup> These guidelines discuss topics such as maximizing website compatibility with assistive technologies (e.g. screen readers) and providing alternative text for non-text content.
- **GOOGLE ANALYTICS** - The site is equipped with Google Analytics, which will help SWRPC staff understand which website content is popular with visitors and where there might be opportunity to improve web-based engagement efforts.

### **E-Mail Newsletter**

SWRPC distributes its electronic newsletter *Happenings* on a semi-monthly basis. *Happenings* content typically focuses on upcoming events, workshops, projects, funding opportunities, and other resources

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>

relevant to the work of SWRPC and its stakeholders. The SWRPC website includes a sign-up form so that members of the public can quickly and easily subscribe for future distributions.

### **Social Media**

SWRPC recognizes that social media is a form of communication that grows ever more prevalent and that it can offer a powerful tool for engaging with members of the public who may not be as easy to reach via traditional media outlets. SWRPC currently maintains a Facebook page which it uses primarily for promoting newsworthy items relevant to its work program. SWRPC staff endeavour to follow best practices such as: incorporating a visual component into each post, “tagging” or “mentioning” partner organizations where applicable; keeping post language short and simple; and “liking” and sharing posts of partner organizations. SWRPC staff have also used the “Facebook live” feature to livestream virtual meetings, extending the opportunity to participate to a wider audience.

### **Virtual and Hybrid Meetings**

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and 2021 and the associated risks of gathering for in-person meetings, virtual meetings have become a common way of conducting business for many organizations including SWRPC. Meeting virtually presents a variety of challenges, some of which are more straightforward to address than others. Examples of challenges include:

- **POOR BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY** - Many households, especially those in rural areas, lack a stable internet connection with sufficient bandwidth to support videoconferencing. SWRPC addresses this challenge by using a videoconferencing platform that provides an option to dial-in by telephone.
- **LOW DIGITAL LITERACY AMONG SOME GROUPS** - Use of videoconferencing software and computer technology more generally remains challenging for some groups and individuals. SWRPC addresses this challenge in a number of ways. The option to participate by phone is one approach. Another strategy is to provide an overview at the top of the meeting on how to participate effectively using the chosen videoconferencing software (at the time of writing SWRPC uses Zoom). Instructing and/or reminding participants on how to: mute/unmute themselves; use “gestures” or “reactions” to communicate non-verbally (e.g. by “raising their hand”); and use the chat functionality to ask questions and provide comments.
- **REDUCED ABILITY TO READ BODY LANGUAGE AND OTHER NON-VERBAL CUES** - Although meaningful communication is certainly possible via videoconferencing, facilitation of group discussion can be more difficult. Without proactive facilitation, more assertive participants can potentially dominate discussion while participants less comfortable speaking in group settings may be less likely to offer their perspective. This dynamic exists with in-person meetings but can be exacerbated in the virtual setting. Facilitators can act as a balancing force by providing each participant with an opportunity to speak.
- **COMPLIANCE WITH PUBLIC MEETING LAW** - Since SWRPC is a public body, meetings of its Board of Directors and Advisory Committees are bound to comply with public meeting law, as established by RSA 91-A<sup>11</sup>. State law requires that, under normal circumstances, public meetings be conducted in person, with a quorum of the board or committee in physical attendance. The law also, however, allows for public meetings to be conducted electronically in the case of an emergency. For much of the coronavirus pandemic, SWRPC has conducted meetings electronically in accordance with the emergency declaration issued by Governor Sununu in March of 2020<sup>12</sup>. At the time of writing,

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/vi/91-a/91-a-mrg.htm>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.governor.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt336/files/documents/2020-04.pdf>

there is movement in the state legislature to authorize public bodies to continue meeting in a virtual format as a matter of normal routine. SWRPC will continue to closely monitor public meeting requirements as they may change over time (e.g., as New Hampshire transitions to a post-pandemic situation).

- **SECURITY** - Virtual meetings can be vulnerable to disruption by bad actors from the internet at large. SWRPC counteracts this potential vulnerability by password-protecting login links and utilizing videoconferencing features such as a “waiting room,” which grants administrators the ability to monitor who is seeking entrance to the meeting.

Although meeting virtually comes with challenges, it also offers advantages, some of which are worth considering. Examples of advantages include:

- **EXPANDED OPPORTUNITY FOR PARTICIPATION** - Virtual meetings can expand access to individuals with transportation challenges as well as others who might find it difficult to attend a meeting in-person (for example, parents without childcare).
- **GREATER CONVENIENCE** - For public meetings with a regional audience, a virtual format is often more convenient for participants that otherwise might need to travel long distances to attend in-person.
- **MEETING RECORDINGS** - Videoconferencing software makes it easy to make meeting recordings, which can be subsequently shared with stakeholders and interested members of the public for later viewing.
- **INTEGRATION WITH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS** - Most videoconferencing software offers integrations with social media platforms like Facebook and Youtube. These integrations allow hosts to livestream meetings and accept participant input over social media, thereby expanding the potential audience.

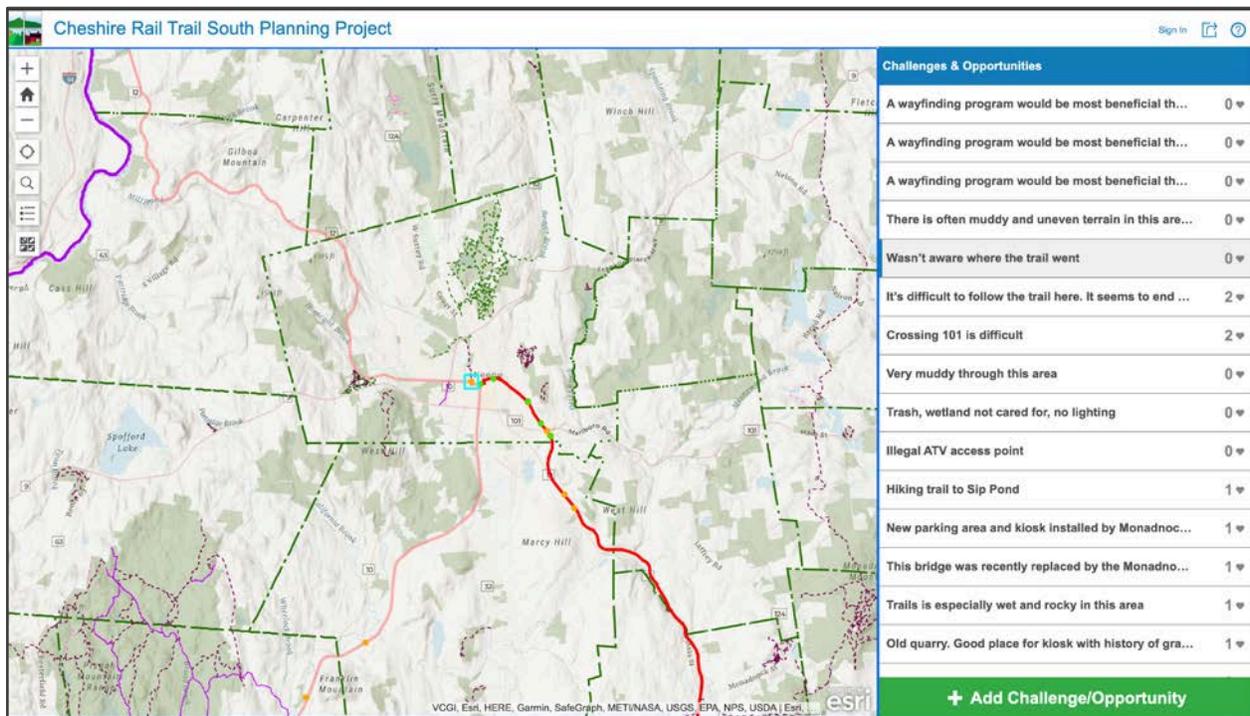
Looking towards the future, SWRPC plans to explore options for combining the best aspects of in-person and virtual meetings to the extent these options are compliant with public meeting requirements. Meetings that use a hybrid format pose some technological and logistical complexities, but could offer a good balance between the dynamic conversation possible of an in-person environment and the expanded access made possible through online channels. Hybrid meetings will require proper audio-visual equipment (e.g. microphones) to ensure that online participants can hear and see everything occurring at the meeting venue.

## Online Surveys

SWRPC frequently uses online surveys to collect information from project stakeholders. Online surveys offer stakeholders a quick and easy way to provide input on specific projects or initiatives. Optimal survey design depends on the specific goals of the project at hand, but SWRPC strives to keep online surveys short and intuitive. SWRPC often includes questions that collect respondent demographic information so that the survey sample can be compared against population data available from other sources (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau). This demographic comparison is important for verifying which groups may be underrepresented in the survey sample and may warrant outreach through alternative methods. It is worth noting that although online surveys offer many advantages, SWRPC also considers circumstances where a hard copy alternative may be appropriate (e.g., when targeted populations may lack internet service or a facility with computing technology).

## Interactive Online Maps

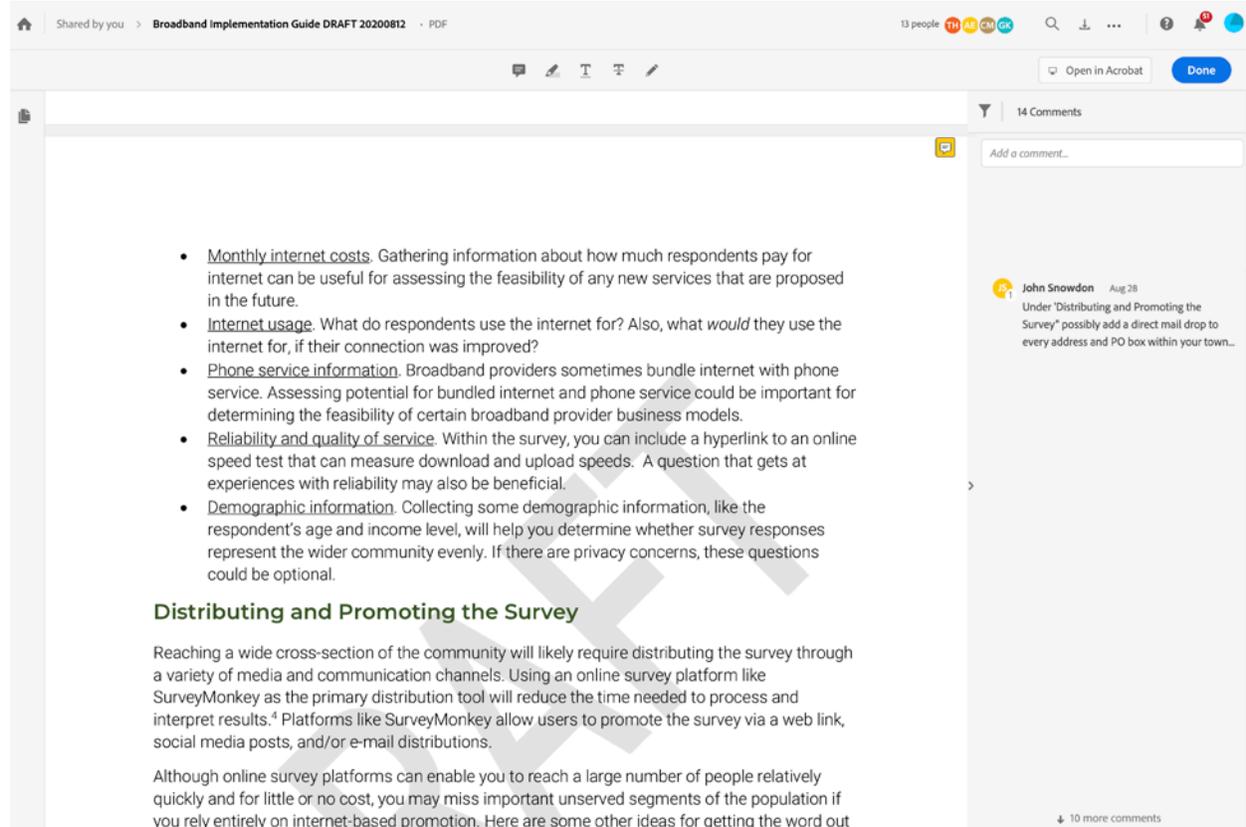
In cases where SWRPC is seeking location-specific information from stakeholders and members of the public, it sometimes uses interactive online maps to collect input. Interactive online maps allow stakeholders to identify a specific point, line, or area relevant to a project or initiative and to describe that location through any number of fields. As with an online survey, a link to an online interactive map can be easily distributed via e-mail, social media, or other channels.



*An example interactive web application used to collect location-specific stakeholder feedback for the Cheshire Rail Trail South Planning Project.*

## Online Commenting Platforms

In circumstances where SWRPC seeks stakeholder or public comment on draft plans or other documents, it sometimes utilizes online document commenting platforms in order to collect and compile feedback. An online commenting platform can also allow users to see and respond to one another's comments, which can lead to increased understanding among participants about each other's thoughts, questions and concerns.



The screenshot shows a PDF document titled "Broadband Implementation Guide DRAFT 20200812" with 14 comments. The document content includes a list of survey considerations and a section on distributing the survey.

- **Monthly internet costs.** Gathering information about how much respondents pay for internet can be useful for assessing the feasibility of any new services that are proposed in the future.
- **Internet usage.** What do respondents use the internet for? Also, what *would* they use the internet for, if their connection was improved?
- **Phone service information.** Broadband providers sometimes bundle internet with phone service. Assessing potential for bundled internet and phone service could be important for determining the feasibility of certain broadband provider business models.
- **Reliability and quality of service.** Within the survey, you can include a hyperlink to an online speed test that can measure download and upload speeds. A question that gets at experiences with reliability may also be beneficial.
- **Demographic information.** Collecting some demographic information, like the respondent's age and income level, will help you determine whether survey responses represent the wider community evenly. If there are privacy concerns, these questions could be optional.

**Distributing and Promoting the Survey**

Reaching a wide cross-section of the community will likely require distributing the survey through a variety of media and communication channels. Using an online survey platform like SurveyMonkey as the primary distribution tool will reduce the time needed to process and interpret results.<sup>4</sup> Platforms like SurveyMonkey allow users to promote the survey via a web link, social media posts, and/or e-mail distributions.

Although online survey platforms can enable you to reach a large number of people relatively quickly and for little or no cost, you may miss important unserved segments of the population if you rely entirely on internet-based promotion. Here are some other ideas for getting the word out

Comments on the right side of the document include a comment from John Snowdon dated Aug 28: "Under 'Distributing and Promoting the Survey' possibly add a direct mail drop to every address and PO box within your town.."

*Soliciting stakeholder comments on draft document using Adobe Creative Cloud.*

## HARD-COPY NEWSLETTER

Recognizing that some stakeholders and members of the public prefer non-digital communication methods, SWRPC publishes and distributes a hard-copy newsletter, *Highlights*, on a monthly basis. The newsletter serves as a useful communication tool for keeping stakeholders informed about ongoing SWRPC projects and activities.

## PUBLIC RECORDS

The State of New Hampshire dictates that public records must be made available for inspection by the public. These records include the minutes, agendas, documents, and records used in the decision-making process and those describing the expenditure of public funds. SWRPC will ensure that the provisions of NH RSA 91-A (Access to Public Records and Meetings) are followed.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> New Hampshire Revised Statutes Annotated (RSA), "Title IV: Public Officers and Employees." *Chapter 91-A: Access to Governmental Records and Meetings.* <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/vi/91-a/91-a-mrg.htm>

## Publications

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The final outcome of the regional planning process is often in the form of a published document. These publications should not only reflect the public comments and suggestions gathered through the public involvement process, but should also be easily accessed and understood by the average person.

### AVAILABILITY

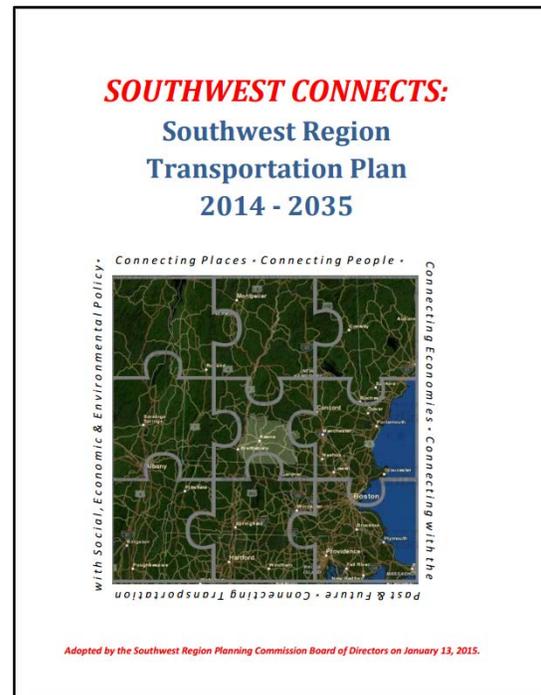
Publications should be made available in both hard copy and electronic formats. These publications should be made available on the SWRPC website and in its office for public review. In certain instances, some documents will be made available in other locations such as local libraries, town halls/offices, websites of partner organizations, etc.

Electronic versions published on the internet should be easy to download and view. SWRPC will try to make files manageable by limiting their size and making them available on a widely used file format, such as pdf.

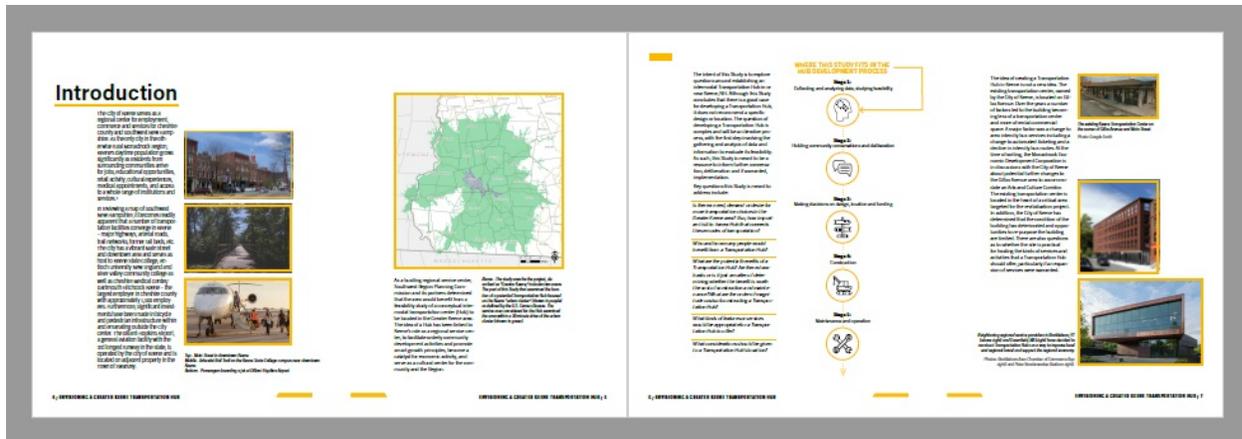
### READABILITY AND COMPREHENSIVENESS

All publications should strive to be readable and comprehensible by the public. The average person reads at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. The following recommendations should be followed in order to increase the readability and comprehensibility of a document:

- **TOPIC** - An individual will read at a higher level if the topic is made interesting. Regional issues should be set within the context of its effects on the region, local area and its residents.
- **LEGIBILITY** - Fonts should not be too small, crowded or faint.
- **SENTENCE LENGTH AND REDUNDANCY** - Short sentences and redundancy help people read at higher levels.
- **FORMAT** - White space and illustrations are appealing and aid in comprehension. Inset boxes should also be used to break up the layout of a page.
- **DENSITY OF INFORMATION** - New ideas should not be concentrated. Too many new concepts at once can be difficult to digest and discourage the reader.
- **LANGUAGE** - Esoteric and technical jargon should be reserved for appendices. Where such jargon is essential to the document, all words and acronyms should be clearly defined and explained.
- **GRAPHICS** - Publications should strive to use visualizations such as GIS maps, graphs, charts, and pictures to communicate concepts and ideas.



*The Southwest Connects Regional Transportation Plan is accessible electronically and in hard copy at the SWRPC office.*



A study published by SWRPC in 2020 showing spare use of text, photos, graphics and a map to improve reader comprehension.

## Complaint and Periodic Review Process

The following procedures should be used to inform the public of SWRPC’s Title VI obligations:

### NOTICE TO PUBLIC OF TITLE VI PROCEDURES

SWRPC will provide public notice that it conducts regional planning under the nondiscrimination requirements as outlined in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This notice will also inform the public that more information is available by contacting SWRPC, at which time a copy of this document will be provided (see Attachment B).

### TITLE VI COMPLAINT PROCESS

Any member of the public will be allowed to file a complaint against SWRPC if they believe that it has violated Title VI obligations. All complaints will be forwarded to the Executive Director upon receipt, and, if applicable, a copy shall be forwarded to the appropriate funding agency (for example, complaints of Title VI discrimination within transportation planning activities will be forwarded to NHDOT Bureau of Human Resources - Office of Civil Rights and Labor Compliance). The SWRPC Board of Directors will then discuss the complaint with assistance from said agency to determine its merits (see Attachment C).

Upon completion of these initial steps, a response to the originator of the complaint shall be sent from the Executive Director of SWRPC informing them if a violation has in fact taken place. SWRPC will work with the relevant state or federal agency to remedy all violations as appropriate on a case-by-case basis. In cases where the procedures outlined in the Public Involvement Plan are flawed and lead to a violation, the Plan should be reviewed and updated to address these issues as soon as possible. All complaints and associated documentation shall be kept on file for a period of 5 years regardless of its outcome.

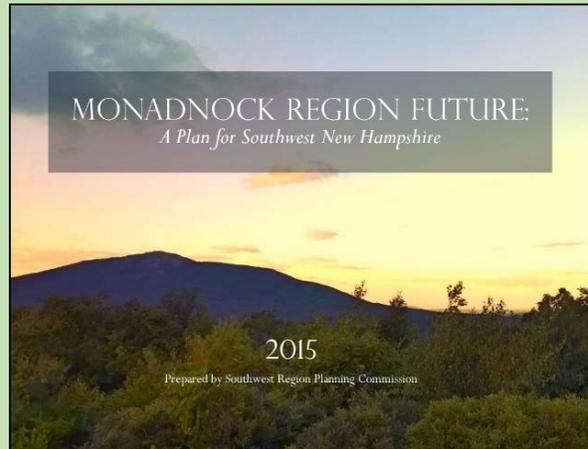
### PERIODIC REVIEW

The Public Involvement Plan should be reviewed periodically by SWRPC staff and the Board of Directors no less frequently than every 5 years and revised as necessary. The effectiveness of the procedures set herein should be reviewed and updated to meet best practices and evolving SWRPC planning requirements.

A public review and comment period should run for no less than 45 days for changes made to the Public Involvement Plan. Public participation is encouraged in this periodic review process.

## CASE STUDY: MONADNOCK REGION FUTURE

Over the period 2012-2015, SWRPC developed *Monadnock Region Future*, a document that provides a vision for the future of the Monadnock Region. The document is a resource for communities to use in local decision making and planning and to stimulate regional collaboration. The outreach methods used during the development of the *Monadnock Region Future* Plan serve as a compelling example for how planning staff can creatively involve the public throughout the planning process.



“*Monadnock Region Future* was the most robust public involvement effort in the history of the agency. Where appropriate and to the extent that resources are available, SWRPC will try to emulate the public involvement principles that were used for that project on future projects.” - *Tim Murphy, SWRPC Executive Director*

To ensure a collaborative and inclusive planning process, SWRPC staff worked with a designated **leadership team**, the Planning Commission’s **Board of Directors**, and its **advisory committees**. The leadership team included members from diverse industries, organizations, and towns within the region and met routinely to share feedback with the SWRPC staff. SWRPC also launched an **extensive public outreach initiative**. SWRPC recognized that a high level of public participation and engagement is the most powerful way to assess the region’s assets, opportunities, and challenges.

Important components of SWRPC’s public involvement efforts included:

- Hosting public community conversations scattered throughout the region;
- Conducting a series of topic-oriented focus groups with diverse organizations;
- Developing and distributing surveys at public events;
- Using web-based tools such as an online survey and map to provide an alternate way for public to share input; and
- Placing suggestion boxes at frequently visited places like general stores, post offices and town halls throughout the region.

SWRPC wrote the plan so that it would be interesting and understandable to the public. It did this by applying concise language, avoiding technical terminology, and incorporating illustrations and photos. According to Tim Murphy, SWRPC Executive Director, “Planners work in a profession that includes a lot of technical jargon, and we depend on a variety of complex data sets to describe planning challenges. When we set out to write *Monadnock Region Future*, we made a concerted effort to ‘tell a story’ about the Monadnock Region using easy to understand language, pictures and graphics.”

SWRPC believes that its extensive public outreach process and its approach to writing the plan resulted in a better regional plan. Spending extra time to interact with the public and local leaders helped SWRPC develop a regional future vision that accurately represented the diverse views, needs, and opinions of the communities within the Monadnock Region.

## **Attachment A: Public Involvement Statutes**

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### **Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI)**

No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, or creed be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

### **Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority and Low-Income Populations (Environmental Justice)**

To the greatest extent practicable and permitted by law, each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies and activities on minority populations and low-income populations in the United States.

### **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

No qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity.

### **Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 - Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act**

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

### **The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act - a Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU):**

This Federal legislation suggests that the transportation planning process pro-actively involve the public by providing full access to information and timely notice to meetings. The decision-making process should be transparent and open to public participation. This statute also requires Metropolitan areas to develop and utilize a *Public Participation Plan* to explicitly demonstrate consideration of public input, especially from those traditionally underserved sections of the population.

### **Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act**

The FAST Act mandates that metropolitan planning processes include a pro-active public participation process. This process should be employed throughout the development of transportation plans and transportation improvement programs and provide opportunities for the public to engage in the decision-making process. Public meetings should be held at convenient times and locations and timely notice of meetings should occur. All documents should be written in a format and style that is comprehensible by any person. The FAST Act emphasizes the use of visual tools to engage citizens in the planning process.

### **Executive Order 13166 - Improving Access to Services for Persons With Limited English Proficiency:**

Executive Order 13166 requires each federal agency that provides financial assistance to develop Limited English Proficiency (LEP) guidance for its recipients on the obligation to provide meaningful access to limited English proficient individuals. Recipients of federal financial assistance are to examine the services they provide, identify any need for services to those with limited English proficiency, and develop and implement a system to provide those services so LEP persons can have meaningful access to them.

**State of New Hampshire State Commission for Human Rights (RSA 354-a)**

The general court hereby finds and declares that practices of discrimination against any of its inhabitants because of age, sex, race, creed, color, marital status, familial status, physical or mental disability or national origin are a matter of state concern, that such discrimination not only threatens the rights and proper privileges of its inhabitants but menaces the institutions and foundation of a free democratic state and threatens the peace, order, health, safety, and general welfare of the state and its inhabitants. In addition, the agencies and councils so created shall exercise their authority to assure that no person be discriminated against on account of sexual orientation.

**State of New Hampshire Right-to-Know Law (RSA 91-a)**

The State of New Hampshire dictates that public records must be made available for inspection by the public. These records include the minutes, agendas, documents, and records used in the decision-making process and those describing the expenditure of public funds.

## Attachment B: Title VI Public Notice

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Southwest Region Planning Commission

Title VI Notice to Public

The Southwest Region Planning Commission (SWRPC) hereby gives public notice of its policy to uphold and assure full compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, and all related statutes. Title VI and related statutes prohibiting discrimination in Federally assisted programs require that no person in the United States of America shall, on the grounds of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be otherwise subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal assistance. Any person who believes they have been aggrieved by an unlawful discriminatory practice regarding the SWRPC's programs has a right to file a formal complaint with SWRPC. Any such complaint must be in writing and submitted to the SWRPC Executive Director within one hundred eighty (180) days following the date of the alleged occurrence. For more information regarding civil rights complaints, please contact:

SWRPC

37 Ashuelot Street

Keene, NH 03431

(603) 357-0557

FAX: (603) 357-7440

[tmurphy@swrpc.org](mailto:tmurphy@swrpc.org)

## **Attachment C: NHDOT Title VI Complaint and Investigation Procedure**

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These procedures cover all complaints filed under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 for alleged discrimination in any program or activity administered by The New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT).

These procedures do not deny the right of the complainant to file formal complaints with other State or Federal agencies or to seek private counsel for complaints alleging discrimination. Every effort will be made to obtain early resolution of complaints at the lowest level possible. The option of informal mediation meeting(s) between the affected parties and the NHDOT may be utilized for resolution. Any individual, group of individuals or entity that believes they have been subjected to discrimination prohibited under Title VI and related statutes may file a written complaint to the following address:

**Title VI Coordinator  
New Hampshire Department of Transportation  
P.O. Box 483, 7 Hazen Drive  
Concord, NH 03302-0483  
Phone: (603) 271-6070  
TTY Access: (800) 735-2964**

The following measures will be taken to resolve Title VI complaints:

1. A formal complaint must be filed within 180 days of the alleged occurrence. Complaints shall be in writing and signed by the individual or her/his representative, and will include the complainant's name, address and telephone number; name of alleged discriminating official, basis of complaint (race, color, national origin, sex, disability, age), and the date of alleged act(s). A statement detailing the facts and circumstances of the alleged discrimination must accompany all complaints.
2. In the case where a complainant is unable or incapable of providing a written statement, a verbal complaint of discrimination may be made to the NHDOT Title VI Coordinator. Under these circumstances, the complainant will be interviewed, and the NHDOT Title VI Coordinator will assist the Complainant in converting the verbal allegations to writing.
3. The Department will investigate complaints filed with the Department against contractors, consultants, or other sub-recipients. Complaints filed directly with the Department against the Department shall be forwarded to the appropriate Federal agency for investigation.
4. When a complete complaint is received, the Title VI Coordinator will provide written acknowledgment to the Complainant, within five (5) days by registered mail. At the same time, the complaint will be forwarded to the State of New Hampshire Attorney General's Office and to the appropriate Federal agency. If a complaint is deemed incomplete, additional information will be requested, and the Complainant will be notified within 15 business days from receipt. The Complainant will be provided 60 business days to submit the required information. Failure to do so may be considered good cause for a determination of no investigative merit.

5. Within 15 business days from receipt of a complete complaint, the NHDOT will determine its jurisdiction in pursuing the matter and whether the complaint has sufficient merit to warrant investigation. Within five (5) days of this decision, the Commissioner or her/his authorized designee will notify the Complainant and Respondent, by registered mail, informing them of the disposition.
  - a. If the decision is not to investigate the complaint, the notification shall specifically state the reason for the decision.
  - b. If the complaint is to be investigated, the notification shall state the grounds of the NHDOT's jurisdiction, while informing the parties that their full cooperation will be required in gathering additional information and assisting the investigator.
6. When the NHDOT does not have sufficient jurisdiction, the Commissioner or her/his authorized designee will refer the complaint to the appropriate State of Federal agency holding such jurisdiction.
7. If the complaint has investigative merit, the Commissioner or her/his authorized designee will assign an investigator. A complete investigation will be conducted, and an investigative report will be submitted to the Commissioner within 45 days from receipt of the complaint. The report will include a narrative description of the incident, summaries of all persons interviewed, and a finding with recommendations
8. The Commissioner or her/his authorized designee will issue letters of finding to the Complainant and Respondent. Where appropriate, these letters will include conciliatory measures. A copy of the investigative report shall be forwarded to the respective Federal agency within 60 days from receipt of the complaint. If the investigation is delayed for any reason, the investigator will notify the appropriate authorities, and an extension will be requested.
9. If the Complainant is dissatisfied with the NHDOT's resolution of the complaint, he/she has the right to file a complaint with the:

**Departmental Office of Civil Rights U.S. Department of Transportation**

**1200 New Jersey Ave, S.E.,**

**Washington, D.C. 20590**

**(202) 366-4648**

**(202) 366-5992**

**TTY Access: (202) 366-9696**

**DC Relay: (202) 855-1000**