

Date: November 21, 2014
To: Mark Hamilton, Skagit Council of Governments
From: Erin Taylor, EnviroIssues, Inc.
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Subject: Skagit Council of Governments – Public Participation Plan Assessment

About EnviroIssues

EnviroIssues has more than 20 years of experience in helping local governments and public agencies engage the public in conversations around issues related to comprehensive planning, transportation and growth management. We help our clients deliver public processes that are inclusive, transparent, and help to inform the decision making process, and believe that providing meaningful opportunities for public engagement and input results in better plans, policies and decisions.

Background

Skagit Council of Governments, also known as SCOG, is committed to ensuring broad-based, early, continuous and meaningful public participation in all planning, programs, and projects. To help achieve this goal, SCOG developed a Public Participation Plan (Plan) in 2003. The existing Plan provides a broad-based overview of policies related to public participation, and includes guidelines for sharing information and seeking public input on SCOG proceedings, policies and projects. SCOG contracted with EnviroIssues in autumn 2014 to conduct an assessment of the current Public Participation Plan and identify opportunities for refinement and improvement.

Methodology

To learn more about how SCOG engages the public currently, and seek feedback on potential outreach strategies and tools, EnviroIssues reviewed the existing Plan, and conducted interviews with key stakeholders.

Key questions evaluated as part of this process have included:

- How is the public notified of upcoming meetings, activities and key decision points?
- How can the public engage in and provide feedback on SCOG's work?
- How does SCOG reach out to and engage traditionally-underrepresented populations?
- What tools have proven effective for sharing information and engaging the public, and what tools have been less effective?

Review of Existing Public Participation Plan

SCOG's existing Plan provides broad policies and guidelines for ensuring public access to SCOG proceedings, conducting public outreach on key issues and topics, and receiving public input.

Key policy goals of the existing Plan include:

- **Public access** – SCOG will provide the public with timeline notice and reasonable access to meetings and information.
- **Public outreach:** SCOG will provide opportunities for the public to engage in issues under consideration by SCOG.
- **Public input:** SCOG will provide opportunities for public input, and consider and respond to public input as part of decision-making processes.

While these policies are appropriate, we recommend that the existing Public Participation Plan be expanded to include additional detail on specific strategies and tools to achieve these policies. To ensure broad public input on SCOG proceedings, policies and projects, we also recommend including information on potential key audiences and stakeholders.

Stakeholder Interviews

To support the Plan update process, stakeholder interviews were a recommended tool to determine best practices from the community to engage them on issues that may affect their daily lives.

Stakeholder interview participants were identified through consultation with SCOG staff, and included individuals that engage with SCOG on a more frequent basis, as well as individuals who do not regularly interact with SCOG staff, its advisory committees, the Transportation Policy Board, or the Board of Directors.

Interviews took place in late October/early November 2014, and were held with representatives from the following organizations:

- Center for Independence North Sound
- Citizens Alliance for Property Rights
- Citizens Alliance for Rural Preservation
- City of Anacortes
- Community Action of Skagit County
- Economic Development Association of Skagit County
- Friends of Skagit County
- Island County
- Island Transit
- Port of Skagit
- Skagit Transit
- WSDOT
- Skagit Council of Governments – Active Community Task Force (ACT)

Questions posed to interview participants covered a range of topics, including:

- Awareness and understanding of SCOG, and its role as a regional planning organization.
- Does SCOG do a good job of engaging the public? What works? What could be improved?
- What issues do people in the region care most about?
- Based on their knowledge of SCOG, what are some potential tools and strategies for successfully sharing information and engaging the public?

What we heard

Through conversations with stakeholders, several key themes emerged:

- The general public has very limited awareness of SCOG, and therefore, how to get involved.
- Generalized interest in additional opportunities to hear from or engage with SCOG.
- For those who participate right now, it often isn't clear how to provide feedback or how public comments are incorporated into the decision-making process.
- People recognize that SCOG staff does a lot with the resources available, and appreciate the outreach SCOG has conducted to community and partner organizations, particularly as part of the Human Services Transportation Plan process.
- People get information from a variety of sources, including local publications, email lists, posted information on the web, outreach activities, word of mouth, and social media sites.
- People like to engage in public processes in different ways, including going to meetings, sending letters or emails, or talking to project staff at events.

The full summary of stakeholder questions and responses is provided as Appendix A.

Assessment and Recommendations

To review the full assessment of SCOG's existing Public Participation Plan and processes, including recommendations to consider, please see the assessment matrix beginning on page 5.

Next steps

Public feedback received through the assessment process will be considered and incorporated as part of the process to update the Plan. The updated Plan will be developed as a core document, with tactical appendices, and will include the following elements:

- Goals and objectives for public participation, including explicit procedures, strategies and desired outcomes
- Background information on SCOG, its role as a regional planning organization and organizational structure

- Strategies and tools for:
 - Planning effective public participation
 - Soliciting public comment and feedback
 - Engaging traditionally under-represented populations
- Metrics for measuring effective public participation
- Information on Limited English Proficiency populations
- Information on local community/social service organizations, and local media outlets

The updated Plan will be made available for public review and comment in mid-December 2014.

Following a 45-day public comment period, the Board will consider adoption of the updated Plan in February 2015.

Assessment and Recommendations

As part of the process to assess SCOG’s existing Public Participation Plan, EnviroIssues conducted interviews with key stakeholders. Questions posed to interview participants covered a range of topics, including: awareness and understanding of SCOG; how SCOG engages with the public; and strategies for sharing information and engaging the public. The matrix below provides key themes of the feedback received, and EnviroIssues’ independent assessment and potential recommendations to consider when updating the Public Participation Plan.

2003 Existing Public Participation Plan Element	What we heard – Key Themes	Sample comments	EnviroIssues’ Assessment	EnviroIssues’ Recommendations to consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All regular meetings of SCOG and any subcommittees shall be open to the public, except as allowed under the State Open Public Meetings Act. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings during the day may be difficult for general public to attend, but certainly work for agency staff and elected who are participants. 	<p><i>Is there a day/time of day when it would be easiest for you to attend a public meeting?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Weekdays between 4:00 and 7:00 pm" "Should have variety of times so you can reach many audiences." "After business hours is more convenient." "Longer interactive open houses work well from 7:00 to 9:00 pm." "Afternoon might work for some people." "Try different times to reach different audiences." "SCOG should be held more accountable and meetings should be recorded and made available to the public." "I would prefer that meetings take place at one place and that they be televised and streamed on the same day and time, and broadcast live on Skagit 21. We need to be able to view what’s going on." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holding all regular SCOG proceedings during the day may limit public participation and feedback. Audio recordings of the meetings are available at request. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SCOG should explore opportunities to hold at least some meetings after regular working hours (e.g. a quarterly evening meeting). Define a “pilot project” for evening meetings to evaluate if alternate times are beneficial to increased public input and participation. SCOG does a good job of posting meeting materials and meeting minutes online, but could also explore videotaping or streaming SCOG proceedings and posting audio footage online.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SCOG may work with civic, advocacy, service and other organizations and interested or potentially interested persons to disseminate information about regional activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SCOG has reached out/engages local community organizations, particularly as part of the recent Human Services Transportation Plan (HSTP) process. Engagement between local community organizations and SCOG often consists of periodic briefings, or invitations to participate in topic-focused subcommittees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "As part of HSTP, SCOG asked the committee for input on how to engage the public – suggested Project Homeless Connect. SCOG did outreach there, and did a Buddy Walk and attended Senior Day in the park." "I think they engage their partner organizations well." "SCOG attended a meeting of the Center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given limited resources, SCOG does a good job reaching out to local organizations, as the needed arises. An example of this is the outreach conducted as part of the Human Services Transportation Plan process. However, given that numerous stakeholders indicated that the general public has little awareness of SCOG, interaction with local organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To build and strengthen relationships between local organizations and SCOG, as well as awareness of SCOG and its work, SCOG should explore opportunities for more frequent, regular interaction with local organizations and community groups. This interaction could take the form of periodic briefings, email updates, phone calls, coffees, attendance at local events, etc.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement between SCOG and local community organizations seems to occur on an as-needed basis, rather than regularly. 	<p><i>for Independence North Sound. This was the first time the organization had engaged with SCOG. SCOG asked attended for feedback on what they thought of the transit authority."</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I served on their committee when they updated their Economic Development Plan." "Service organizations meet together on the fourth Thursday of every month to discuss rotating topics. SCOG hasn't attended before. Around 30 people attend, representing different groups." 	<p>should occur on a more regular basis, and with greater frequency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SCOG should look to local organizations to help share information about SCOG events and activities. The updated PPP should include a roster of local organizations, their area of interest, contact information, and a proposed approach for regular coordination. This list would be developed by the Consultant with feedback from SCOG.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Public Participation Plan should be reviewed periodically to determine its effectiveness assuring full and open access to all. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The current Public Participation Plan was originally adopted in 2003 and has not been substantively updated since then. The process to assess the Public Participation Plan and make updates, as needed, should occur on a much more regular and frequent basis to account for changes in demographics, and new tools for engagement, such as social media. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The updated PPP should establish a more formal process for reviewing, assessing and updating the plan. The PPP should be reviewed by SCOG staff at least annually, and a process for more substantive review should occur every several years. Regular evaluation of the PPP should consider the effectiveness of outreach tools and techniques. (e.g. "What has worked?" "What doesn't seem to be as effective?")
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SCOG shall inform and educate the public about regional issues using a variety of means, including, but not limited to: regular and special meetings, printed materials, electronic communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The general public has limited awareness/understanding of what SCOG is, and what it does. The information and materials that SCOG developed and distributes are good, but may not be widely read or understood by the public. There may be a need for improved strategies for reaching broader audiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Broader community may not know what SCOG is, its function, or how to engage with SCOG. The public usually shows up if it affects them. People in general don't seem to understand what SCOG is. SCOG could do a better job of telling its story. It would be nice to have people who could come and champion projects – they don't currently have that." "I think SCOG is hidden from the public." "No one I know outside of SCOG knows it." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A key challenge that SCOG faces from a public engagement perspective is that the general public may not know it exists, or if they do, how to engage on the issues that are of importance to them. This can result in limited feedback, and lack of a broader perspective on important regional issues. SCOG does a good job of posting information on the agency website. This includes meeting dates, meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SCOG should look to "tell its story" by clearly explaining to the public: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What SCOG does What its role is and why it exists What issues it is involved with Who comprises SCOG How to learn more about SCOG How to get involved with SCOG How and to provide feedback Why the public should care about SCOG This could be accomplished through the development of pithy, key messages, that could

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		<p><i>They do have fairly lengthy articles in the paper sometimes; the information is out there if you want it."</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"For the layperson, connecting SCOG with regional transportation is hard. They have an excellent website, maps, and graphics. The information they're putting out is high quality."</i> • <i>"For some of the plans they've been responsible for, their plan for community input is hit and miss. I don't think they do a good job of hosting and promoting public participation."</i> • <i>"I think SCOG hosts public meetings but does not have enough public participation, which makes it seem like they are hiding something from the public."</i> • <i>"When I heard about the existence of SCOG, in principle, I was grateful. Remember the days when there was no communication between the mayors at all. SCOG does force a communication among them."</i> • <i>"Maybe SCOG should be the disseminator of information. Maybe that should be their role."</i> • <i>"Tell the story better; make it interesting instead of just providing facts and figures."</i> • <i>"SCOG is the worst offender in terms of use of acronyms. They never spell it out the first time. I bet most SCOG members have no idea what those things stand for. Jargon is also an issue. "</i> 	<p>materials and meeting minutes, and planning documents. Building awareness that this information exists is critical.</p>	<p>then be used in a variety of ways (e.g. on the web, in email updates, talking points for briefings, fact sheets and other handouts, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCOG should also look to recruit partner organizations to help with this effort, through distribution of information, briefings, posting links back to the SCOG website, etc. • Avoid use of jargon and acronyms in public proceedings and materials.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A public comment period shall be provided during each regular meeting of the Skagit Council of Governments. The Chair may limit the duration of comments or provide alternative options for public comment in certain circumstances. • Written and oral comments will be maintained in SCOG's files. In certain circumstances, the comments may be incorporated into plans, programs or studies, either in total or in summary. • SCOG shall offer different avenues for public comment, written, oral, formal, informal, electronic and other means suitable to the project and the community involved. • As needed, SCOG will utilize surveys to assess either widespread or selected public opinion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public comment periods at regular SCOG proceedings may not provide adequate opportunity for dialogue on important issues. • Stakeholders interviewed are generally aware of how to comment on key issues, but public understanding is limited. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"The public comment period is too short, and the comments are not considered enough."</i> • <i>"We have all gone to a SCOG meeting and made comments. Why are comments limited? Where is the statutory basis for limiting people's time to speak? There is none. When you make a public comment, there are no questions asked by the Board, there is no discussion about what you said. It's like you were never there. It's never referred to ever again."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCOG meetings (Board, TPB) provide public comment periods of three (3) minutes per commenter. This allocation is fairly standard for public agencies. • Public comment is taken at meetings, but perceived as not consistently facilitated. • Agenda briefing papers provide quality technical detail, but unless applicable to a large decision topic, do not have a focus area for public involvement. • SCOG provides multiple forums for public comment, including at meetings, and online, but public understanding and awareness of how to comment is limited. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider providing forums outside of regular SCOG proceedings for more substantive dialogue and conversation (e.g. semi-annual community forums) • As part of formal planning processes, SCOG should ensure that it loops back with the public by reporting out on the nature of comments received and how those comments were addressed as part of the process. • All meeting chairs/facilitators should host comment periods consistently to set expectations clearly to the public. • One option for using public comment is to focus feedback on items that are to be decided upon at that meeting (example: Sound Transit Board of Directors only takes public comment on those agenda items where a decision is to be made that day, not discussion items). • Consider adding a "public involvement" section to each agenda item briefing paper, detailing how public was engaged (or if not applicable to that agenda topic), and generally what sentiment was; this emphasizes level of importance of PI by the organization to decision-making. • For all major decisions, Board is assumed/understood to take up topic as discussion topics first at a preceding meeting, to ensure conversation does occur in the public arena. Continue this practice, potentially more formally. • Consider developing a "Public Participation 101" section on SCOG's website that clearly explains how people can get involved and the different ways to provide feedback. • At public outreach events, clearly explain, both verbally and in project materials, how to provide comments, and how those comments will be considered.

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				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As appropriate, loop back with the public to show the key themes of comments received, and how those comments were addressed.
Elements not included in the Existing Public Participation Plan	EnvirolIssues' Recommendations to consider			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Metrics for measuring success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Metrics for measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of outreach tools and techniques should be included in the updated PPP. As an example, these could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of public meetings or public outreach activities held (and geographic reach within SCOG area) Number of opportunities for public comment Number and key themes of public comments received Number of interactions with community organizations and other key stakeholders by SCOG staff (e.g. meetings, briefings, events, etc.) Number of responses received to paper or online surveys Where and how information about SCOG was distributed (meeting notifications, events, etc.) On a semi-regular basis, Executive Director can report out these metrics during a standing meeting agenda item. As appropriate, the Board and staff could then determine which outreach which outreach tools and techniques have proven less effective in engaging the public, and plan future public engagement accordingly. As part of regular reviews of the PPP, SCOG staff could distribute an online survey to the public and key stakeholders, seeking narrative feedback on the effectiveness of public participation strategies and tools, and ideas on opportunities for improvement. 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Procedures and policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The updated PPP should include explicit policies and procedures to guide implementation of public engagement. These would include procedures for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing adequate public notice of public participation activities and opportunities to provide comment Providing timely notice and reasonable access to information about transportation issues and processes Making public information available online Making public information available in alternate formats Holding public meetings at convenient times and accessible locations Demonstrating consideration and response to public input 			