



Virtual Public Involvement Practices in NEPA

North Carolina Department of Transportation Corridor K

This case study discusses virtual public involvement (VPI) strategies implemented by the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) to help meet National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) public hearing requirements for the Corridor K Project Environmental Assessment (EA). The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) typically requires that agencies hold in-person public hearings, in accordance with 23 U.S. Code (U.S.C.) § 128. NCDOT held a virtual public hearing in October 2020. NCDOT worked to publicize the opportunity to provide feedback on the EA using both VPI and traditional strategies to reach the population of stakeholders in project area that did not have access to broadband.



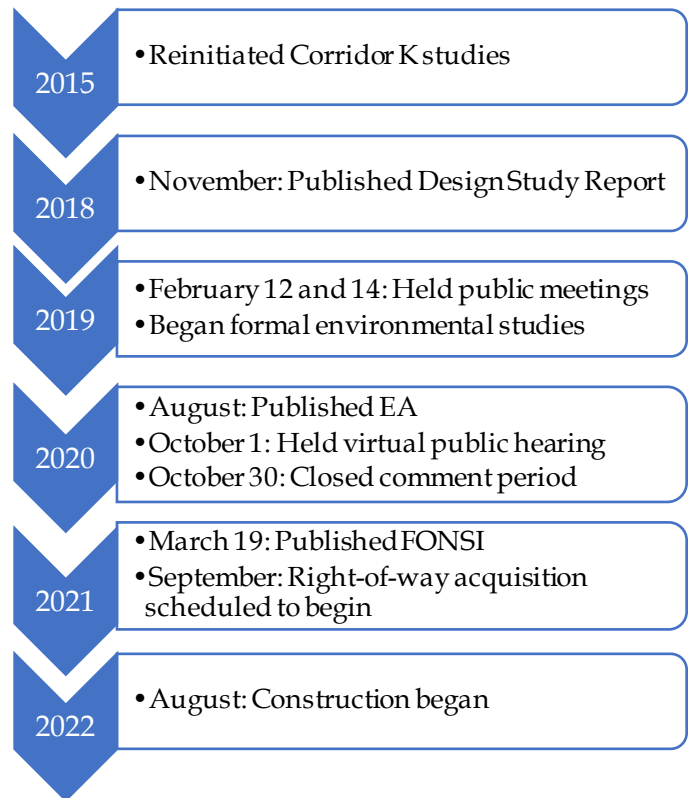
Corridor K Project Background

Corridor K is a 127-mile section of the Appalachian Development Highway System, which extends from Tennessee to North Carolina. This portion of Corridor K runs from N.C. 28 in Stecoah to U.S. 129 in Robbinsville, North Carolina (see Figure 1, below). The Corridor K project will include adding alternating climbing and passing lanes with an eight-foot shoulder. The purpose of the project is to improve mobility and reliability along Corridor K.



Project-Specific VPI Approach

Public hearings are encouraged but not required for EAs in North Carolina. NCDOT chose to hold a live, virtual public hearing for the Corridor K EA, as well as use a website on a virtual platform to share information and collect comments. NCDOT held the virtual public hearing on October 1, 2020. NCDOT also provided the option for members of the public without broadband access to provide feedback on the EA and recommended project design via mail, phone, or one-on-one meetings.



NCDOT mailed newsletters to 1,698 property owners in the study area two weeks before the virtual public hearing. The newsletter contained a project update; instructions for how to access the virtual public hearing; a link to the project website along with a QR code; contact information for the project team; instructions for how to provide comments online by email or by phone; and

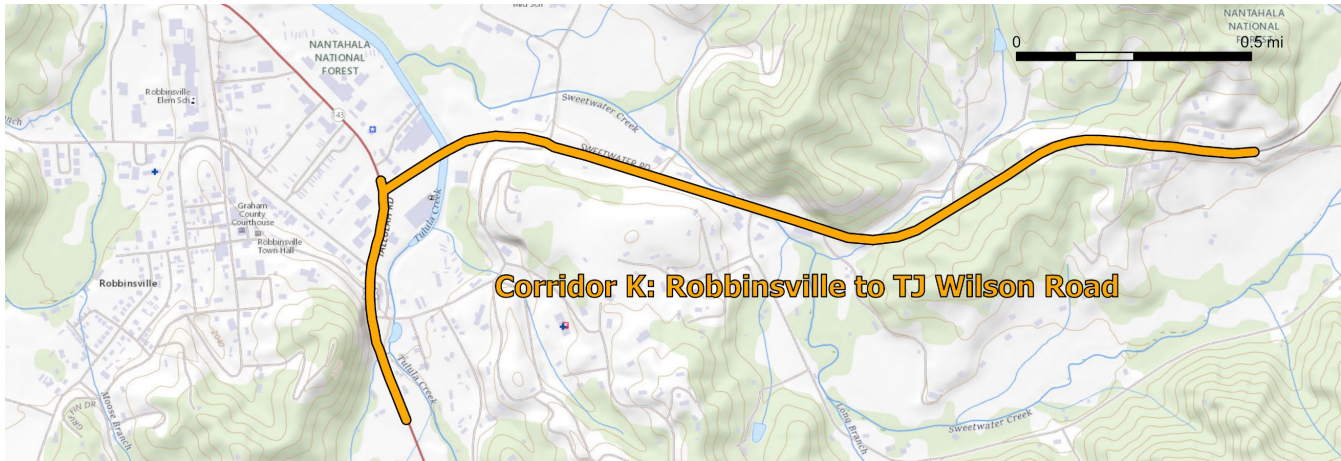


Figure 1. Map of Corridor K Project from Robbinsville to TJ Wilson Road. Source: Volpe Center, USGS, and NCDOT.

instructions for how to request hearing materials without access to the internet. NCDOT also made the EA and copies of project maps available for review at three NCDOT offices in the project area.

Further, NCDOT ran a public notice in the city newspaper and issued a press release online the week of the hearing. NCDOT also utilized radio advertisements during typical commuting times to announce the virtual hearing while referring listeners to the project website. These advertisements reached drivers who regularly use the highway and drivers passing through the study area for recreational or other purposes. NCDOT also advertised the virtual public hearing using social media, including through posts on NCDOT’s social media accounts, as well as through paid social media advertisements, geotargeted by ZIP code to ensure that stakeholders in and around the project area were aware of the opportunity to provide input.

To prepare for the virtual public hearing, NCDOT set up a [virtual platform website](#) to host a prerecorded video and collect public comments. NCDOT has created a virtual platform website for all of its transportation projects since 2019 and uses VPI to advertise stakeholder engagement opportunities for all projects. To increase the public’s trust in the website as an official NCDOT site, the project team worked with NCDOT’s

information technology (IT) team to apply a “skin” to the site that matched the look and feel of the agency’s home website. The website also provided an option for people to subscribe to project updates. Online materials posted on the website were also designed to be easily viewed with mobile phones. The public could also email a project-specific address to submit a comment as part of the record or call NCDOT and leave a voicemail, which staff later transcribed and recorded.

The virtual public hearing, held using a web conferencing website, included a live formal presentation (the same presentation posted on the project website), followed by review of the public hearing maps, and a live question and answer/comment period. Approximately 33 citizens attended the virtual public hearing. Ten people posted questions or comments in the online meeting chat box, submitting a total of 27 specific comments or questions. NCDOT received 15 additional comments via email and transcribed voicemails. Figure 2 below shows a screenshot of the recording of the public hearing, Figure 4 below shows a chart of participation in the Corridor K public hearing process.

NCDOT also offered one-on-one in-person meetings on request. During these meetings, staff planned to provide project overviews, review project maps, and offer to mail any participants a

compact disc or hard copy of all materials being presented on the website and during the public hearing. One stakeholder requested an in-person one-on-one meeting for the Corridor K project, and the project team did send out several hard copies of project materials and received 13 mailed comment sheets.

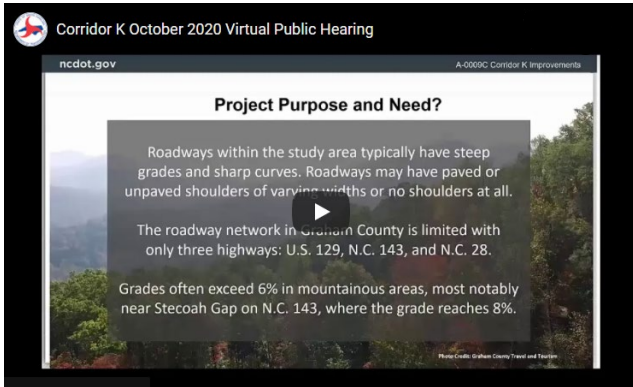


Figure 2. Screenshot of prerecorded video from the Corridor K virtual public hearing held in October 2020. Source: NCDOT.

Figure 3 shows how public participation in the virtual public hearing compared with the 2019 public meeting (held in-person), including the number of meeting participants and number of people who chose to subscribe to project updates from NCDOT. The 2020 public hearing was focused on the selected alternative for Corridor K, which represents approximately one-third of the study area discussed in 2019. Given the smaller project study area discussed in the 2020 hearing, NCDOT expected fewer meeting participants. However, there were more subscribers than hearing participants, indicating that NCDOT’s use of a combination of outreach tactics, including VPI, helped attract additional stakeholder interest.



Challenges

According to NCDOT, one of the biggest challenges related to utilizing VPI strategies for the Corridor K project was that many of the surrounding populations in the study area had limited or no broadband access. NCDOT was unsure of people’s ability to maintain connectivity

for the virtual hearing given the anticipated number of meeting participants. Additionally, NCDOT had to ensure that those without access to the internet could receive project information in printed form and had appropriate and sufficient opportunities to provide feedback. Additionally, NCDOT ensured there was a project phone number for participants to leave a message, request team member assistance, or request printed materials. By creating multiple opportunities for engagement, NCDOT was able to have confidence that they reached project stakeholders without holding an in-person public hearing.

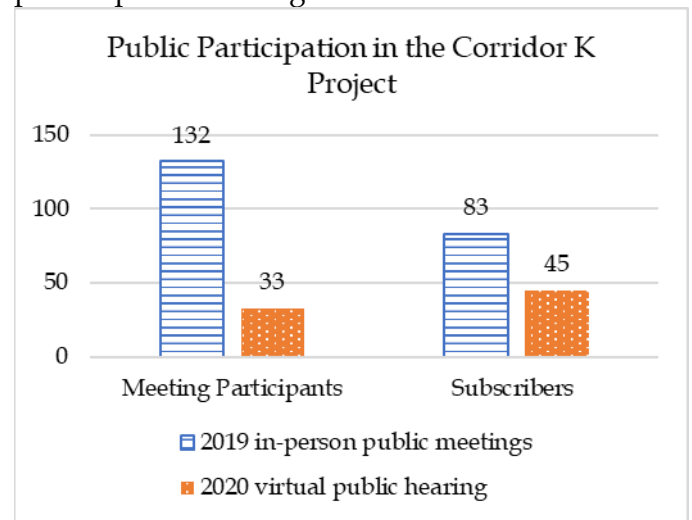


Figure 3. Bar chart comparing meeting participants and subscribers from the 2019 in-person public meeting to the 2020 virtual public hearing for the Corridor K project. The 2020 public hearing was focused on the selected alternative for Corridor K, which represents approximately one-third of the study area discussed in 2019.



Reaching Underserved Populations

While many underserved populations have cell phones, they often do not have consistent and reliable broadband access. During the Corridor K public outreach process, NCDOT aimed to make all public involvement materials mobile-friendly so that those without internet access and computers could easily view project materials on cell phones.

NCDOT identified low-income populations in the study area for Corridor K, but determined that there were no environmental justice populations that would face disproportionately high and adverse effects due to the project.



Benefits of Virtual Public Hearings and VPI

NCDOT believed that its use of VPI strategies allowed it to reach a broader demographic than it would have through only using traditional outreach methods given the population in the project area. VPI allows people to engage on their own time in the way they feel most comfortable. For example, stakeholders can review project materials in advance of a meeting, as many times as they want, and can then submit questions and comments online at their convenience.

NCDOT noted that the scripted presentations also helped the agency ensure it was providing consistent messaging to the public. The project team recorded the presentation that they gave during the virtual public hearing. The team posted the presentation on [its virtual platform website](#) and project websites to ensure that stakeholders who attended the live public hearing and those who watched the recording received the same information.



Lessons Learned

Using traditional outreach and engagement methods in areas with limited broadband access is critical.

While NCDOT utilizes VPI strategies on all projects, the project team for Corridor K recognized that the lack of broadband access and rural nature of the Corridor K project area necessitated the use of traditional outreach methods. Cell phone reception and broadband access are inconsistent in the project area, so sending newsletters and postcards was a critical strategy to reach stakeholders. The use of radio advertisements also provided opportunities for those without internet access to learn more about the hearing.

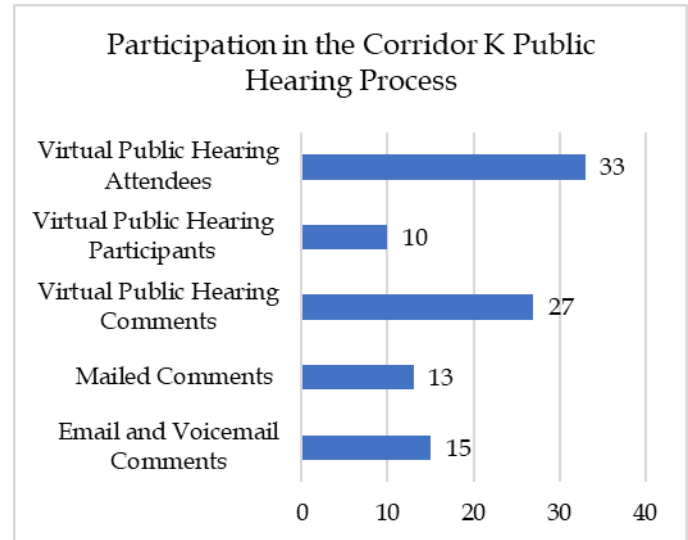


Figure 4. Bar chart showing participation in the Corridor K public hearing process, including number of attendees at the virtual public hearing, number of participants at the virtual public hearing (those that submitted comments or questions), number of comments received at the virtual public hearing, number of mailed comments, and number of email and voicemail comments.

Consistent stakeholder engagement tailored to a specific community can help increase public trust in and support for a project. To ensure appropriate stakeholder engagement, NCDOT believes it is critical to understand the characteristics of the community where the project is located, while working hard to establish consistent relationships with various stakeholders. For example, from 2015 to 2020 throughout the Corridor K NEPA process, the project team conducted over 60 meetings with stakeholders, including a group of environmental advocates; local elected officials; and resource and regulatory agencies to ensure buy-in on project decisions and alternatives.

Extensive outreach was especially critical for Corridor K since the project attracted enhanced public interest due to its location along the Appalachian Trail and its potential impacts to the natural environment. NCDOT reported that its outreach efforts – which focused on incorporating public feedback throughout the project development process (rather than just prior to EA publication) – fostered stakeholder trust in the preferred alternative. NCDOT received only one

comment opposing the project during the EA public comment process.

Coordination with IT staff can support institutionalization of VPI strategies. To institutionalize VPI, it is critical to coordinate with IT staff early to ensure that chosen technology is compatible with State laws and agency requirements. Coordination with IT staff later in the process may cause delays. It is also critical to consider the cost of VPI tools. Costs are typically lower when a State obtains a subscription to these tools.

Corridor K project in March 2021 and began right-of-way acquisition in fall 2021. Construction began in August 2022.

NCDOT is sure that the use of VPI, virtual meetings, and virtual hearings will only continue to grow. Virtual public engagement allows stakeholders the convenience of participating on their own time, and better understand the transportation project development process through reviewing extensive online resources. Much of the public is also now familiar with engaging with others online via social media. NCDOT also believes that use of VPI strategies, combined with traditional outreach, creates increased trust in agency communications that may be more limited with solely in-person public engagement.



Next Steps

NCDOT issued its Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the

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For more information on virtual public involvement (VPI) refer to the following website:
https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement/vpi/

For more information on NEPA public hearing requirements refer to the following website:
https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/nepa/trans_decisionmaking.aspx

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