

INTERVIEW

One County's Move to Online-Only Meetings

When the COVID-19 pandemic made traditional public meetings off limits, officials in Charleston County, South Carolina, opted to move forward with [a virtual substitute](#) in order to keep a major road project on track. We asked county Public Information Officer Shawn Smetana and Public Administration Liaison Taylor Green about the decision and the process of using an online-only meeting:

Q. In making the decision to move public engagement forward on your project what were the major challenges that you had to overcome?

A. Staff and elected officials weighed the pros and cons of delaying the in-person meeting in a time of crisis versus extending the project's schedule. In the end, all parties involved agreed that holding an online only meeting would still facilitate public involvement while keeping this critical infrastructure project on schedule. The most difficult challenge in only offering an online meeting is ensuring that citizens without internet could still gain access to the presented information. To combat this, the County prepared handouts of the meeting's materials and will mail hard copies to anyone who requests them.

Q. How did you decide that virtual engagement would work for your stakeholders?

A. The County has successfully held several online meetings, which typically parallel the in-person meetings. With the Main Road public meeting shifting to an online-only format, it was important that the presented information be clear and easy to follow. To ensure citizens understood all of the presented information, the online meeting included a short video to verbally and visually explain how to navigate the virtual platform. The meeting also lists a contact number for those who need more assistance understanding the online format. Citizen feedback is important to shaping the project, so the online meeting provides an option to submit comments electronically, or to print a pdf form and mail their comments to the project manager.

Q. How did you craft your message around COVID-19 considerations?

A. Charleston County has been engaged in communications

regarding the Coronavirus / COVID 19 pandemic with all levels of government. We relied on advice from health officials, state and local leadership. The County put out a news release and sent out mailers explaining the cancellation of the upcoming in-person meeting due to the ongoing coronavirus / COVID 19 health crisis and the recommendation to limit public gatherings. The safety of the citizens of Charleston County is of the utmost importance.

Q. How did you choose your engagement platform?

A. The project already has a website that hosted an online public meeting in May 2019. It has become standard practice for transportation sales tax projects requiring public information meetings to offer online meetings for those who cannot attend the in-person meeting. Online meetings are beneficial in that the public can take their time to view, zoom in and out, and digest the information presented which isn't always possible at an in-person meeting.

Q. How are you addressing regulations specially ADA compliance and NEPA, if applicable?

A. The County provided a number to call for those who speak Spanish or who are hearing impaired. The NEPA process did not require that the County hold this meeting. Staff decided to have this meeting to provide the public an opportunity to review and comment on the recommended preferred alternative.

Q. How will the experience of using more virtual engagement change your practices even after the current COVID-19 situation has settled down?

A. The County may consider holding online only public information meetings in the future, but will likely continue holding in person meetings for those without internet access.