

Accessibility in Public Participation During a Pandemic: Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT)

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Context; Defining the Problem

COVID-19 regulations continue to loosen in Virginia as we have entered Phase 3 of reopening and public gathering size limits have broadened, and there is no guarantee that Virginia will revert back to an earlier phase, as we have seen in California. VDOT is preparing for the still uncertain future of public gatherings and civic engagement in public hearings with solutions for threats to public participation during a global pandemic.

Why is public participation important?

THREATS TO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

- ★ COVID-19 & social distancing regulations
- ★ Lack of universal broadband accessibility
- ★ Federal civic engagement regulations surrounding virtual public hearings
- ★ Issues spreading public hearing information to citizens affected by VDOT projects

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

- ★ VDOT
- ★ Citizens/residents/public
- ★ Internet service providers
- ★ Environmental/climate equity advocates
- ★ Policy makers/state, local government officials
- ★ Workers
- ★ Public sector service providers
- ★ Project investors



Someone speaking at a public hearing
(RioOnWatch, 2018)

Policy Formation

In some jurisdictions, VDOT can hold virtual meetings for transportation projects! Yet this still risks excluding a demographic that does not have stable access to broadband and Internet services.



Suffolk city, Virginia, outdoor public hearing, June 25, 2020 (Halacy, 2020)

Significant Regulations

- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) regulations surrounding virtual public hearings
- Social distancing requirements
- Limits on gathering sizes

Some VA Public Hearings

- Outdoor hearing in **Suffolk City** - *June 25, 2020*
- Virtual hearing in **Louisa County** - *April, 2020*
- Virtual hearing in **Pittsylvania County** - *August, 2020*

Methods for Public Input

- In Louisa and Suffolk, citizens were invited to mail in comments or call into virtual meetings via telephone.
- Some counties invite citizens to submit feedback online.

The Data



78.3%

Suffolk city households with a broadband Internet subscription, 2014-2018



73%

Richmond city households with a broadband Internet subscription, 2014-2018



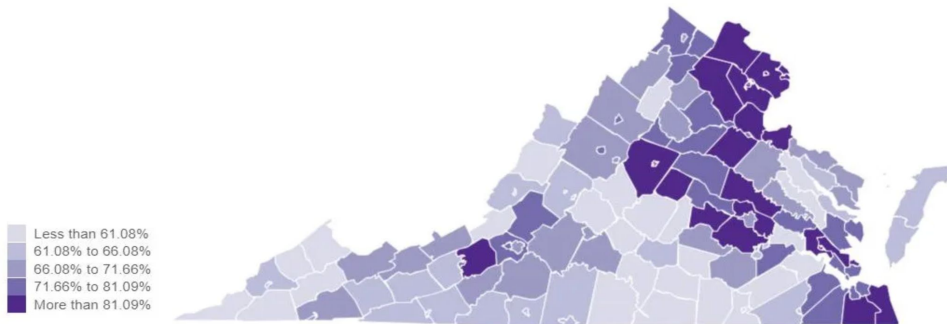
48.2%

Lee county households with a broadband Internet subscription, 2014-2018 (rural, age factor)

(United States Census Bureau)

Broadband Internet Access, 2017

Percent of households with broadband internet access.



Source: US Census Bureau 2013-2017 American Community Survey. Calculation: # of Households with broadband access / Total # of Households

Virginia ranks



*for broadband access in the U.S.
with 82% of households
equipped with a broadband
Internet subscription. (Cooper,
2020)*

Suffolk city, Richmond city and
Lee county *all* have access to
two or more providers. (FCC)

Policy Implications

?

Who Is Affected?

01

Citizens/Residents

- Loss of opportunities for input on projects which affect them and their communities
- Risk being silenced and uninformed

02

People with *no* internet access

- Little to no opportunities for virtual participation
- Potential to be left out

03

People who are houseless

- Little to no access to information
- Little to no opportunities for virtual participation
- Potential to be left out

04

VDOT

- Unable to receive feedback from citizens/residents (their ideas can influence projects, etc.)
- May miss info about communities they build in

?

Policy Effects

- FHWA has been overly conservative in their approach to virtual hearings (FHWA, 2020)
- Phase 3 of reopening allows public gatherings of **up to 250 people**
- July 1, 2020 - 'Landmark' Broadband Funding passed with the support of Abigail Spanberger for faster internet in rural areas. (Schemmer, 2020)

What next?

What can VDOT do to spread information about public hearings, whether virtual or safely held in person, to all intended citizens, *including* those who do not have regular access to stable broadband and/or Internet services?



Outdoor public hearings!

Television Announcements

Radio Announcements

Text messaging

social media

Flyers

Emailed/Mailed
Surveys, Invitations
& Information

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