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“Strengthening our communities through opportunities and service”

Southwestern Minnesota Opportunity Council, Inc. Transit Public Involvement Plan Prairieland Transit System

The goals of Southwestern Minnesota Opportunity Council, Inc.’s Transit Public Involvement Plan are twofold. First, to ensure early, continuous, and broad public notification about and participation in major actions and decisions by the SMOC and second, to get meaningful public input to inform the decision making process. This plan establishes consistent, minimum procedures to accomplish these goals; procedures beyond these minimums may be applied as warranted and are encouraged.

The term “major” is to be applied loosely. If a proposed action or decision is clearly a normal course-of-business activity that does not significantly affect the public or alter public policy, it may not be necessary to apply these procedures. But, if there is a question as to whether these procedures should be followed, then the agency should follow them to ensure appropriate public notification and participation.

However, failure to exactly comply with these procedures shall not, in and of itself, render any decisions or actions invalid.

Effective public involvement is a key element in addressing Title VI in decision-making. Recipients engaged in planning and other decision-making activities must have a documented public participation process that provides adequate notice of public participation activities, and early and continuous opportunities for public review and comment at key decision points. Underlying these efforts is our commitment to determining the most effective outreach methods for a given project or population.

This **Public Participation Plan** describes how SMOC will disseminate vital agency information and engage the public by seeking out and considering the needs and input of interested parties and those traditionally underserved by existing transportation systems, such as minority and limited English proficient persons, who may face challenges accessing programs and other services. General public involvement practices will include:

- Scheduling meetings at times and locations that are convenient and accessible for minority and LEP communities.
- Employing different meeting sizes and formats.
- Coordinating with community- and faith-based organizations, educational institutions, and other entities to implement public engagement strategies that reach out specifically to members of affected minority and/or LEP communities.
- Providing opportunities for public participation through means other than written communication, such as personal interviews or use of audio or video recording devices to capture oral comments.
- Considering radio, television, or newspaper ads on stations and in publications that serve LEP populations. Outreach to LEP persons could also include audio programming available on podcasts.

SMOC's Desired Outcomes for its Public Involvement:

1. To get public input on the SMOC's activities and decisions
2. To share information with a broad cross-section of the public
3. To ensure notification and participation of traditionally underserved populations
4. To increase overall awareness of regional planning activities

This Transit Public Involvement Plan will be reviewed periodically for its effectiveness.

Principles to Help Guide SMOC's Public Involvement Activities:

1. No major public policy decision is reached or large project implemented without significantly affecting someone.
2. Professionals do not have a monopoly on good solutions.
3. Even if a project or policy decision is sensible and beneficial, it must be arrived at properly to be acceptable.
4. People are much more willing to live with a decision that affects different interests unequally if the decision-making process is open, objective and considers all viewpoints.
5. If project or policy staff don't provide all relevant information necessary for an informed decision, the public will rely on – and trust – others.
6. Interacting with an official representative of an organization or group is no substitute for interacting directly with that organization or group.
7. Effective public notification and participation takes time and effort, and can be expensive, yet is essential to sound decision-making.

Public Notification and Involvement Procedures

A variety of public notification and involvement procedures will be used to encourage the early and continuous involvement of citizens, jurisdictions, communities and other interests in the planning process and the decisions and actions of SMOC. Meetings and publications will occur regularly and provide ample notice on key decision making opportunities.

SMOC will continue to incorporate additional outreach efforts, beyond what is listed here. Procedures for meeting fundamental public involvement requirements are established in the following sections: Meetings, Publications, Key Decisions and Activities, and Additional Outreach Efforts.

Passengers and other interested persons will be informed of their rights under Title VI and related authorities with regard to our program. The primary means of achieving this will be posting and disseminating the policy statement and notice. Additional measures may include openly stating our obligations and the public's rights at meetings, placing flyers at places frequented by targeted populations, and an equal opportunity tag-on at the end of radio announcements. The method of notification will be determined through continuous screening of the service area.

SMOC's Regularly Scheduled Meetings

SMOC's Board of Directors holds monthly meetings. The meeting schedule is available on SMOC's website at <http://www.smoc.us>.

In addition to SMOC Board Meetings, the Nobles County Joint Powers Transit Authority holds monthly meetings at which regular transit business items are considered. Community members have the opportunity to place items on the agenda for those meetings.

SMOC transit staff are available during normal business hours at the SMOC office. Staff can be reached in person, by phone, and by e-mail. Comments on pending issues will be accepted at any time.

SMOC's Publications

SMOC maintains a website about its programs and activities. SMOC's website, www.smoc.us, contains announcements about upcoming events and meetings. The website contains a specific section dedicated to Transit issues.

Key Decisions and Actions

At key decision points, SMOC will provide citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, private providers of transportation, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled, and other interested parties with reasonable opportunities to be involved in the transportation planning process.

Efforts to fulfill this requirement will include opportunities for interested parties to be involved in the early stages of plan, program and policy development. These efforts may include publications, workshops, open houses, visualization techniques, or participation in other public forums or methods to provide opportunities for the public to learn about and participate in planning, program and policy development.

These efforts will include publication of appropriate documents, public notice of availability of such documents, and/or other methods to make them available for public review. They also will include notice as to where to send written comments, and who at the agency will receive written comments and can provide additional information. Public comment received will be summarized and presented to the Nobles County Joint Powers Transit Authority. As part of these efforts, SMOC will proactively seek out and consider the needs of people traditionally under served by transportation systems.

Additional Outreach Efforts

SMOC will conduct additional outreach efforts as appropriate to provide public opportunities for comment, suggestions, ideas and concerns. This may include workshops, open houses, forums, and other events. SMOC will encourage public comment and participation through advisory committees, presentations to civic groups, and other efforts as appropriate.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to public involvement. A variety of comprehensive and targeted public participation methods will be used to facilitate meaningful public involvement. Methods for engaging stakeholders and target audiences, including traditionally underserved and excluded populations (i.e., minorities, youth, low-income, the disabled, etc.) will include the following:

Public Relations and Outreach

Public relations and outreach strategies aim to conduct well-planned, inclusive and meaningful public participation events that foster good relations and mutual trust through shared decision-making with the communities we serve.

- We will seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.
- Public events will aim to be collaborative, fun, and educational for all, rather than confrontational and prescriptive.
- Media plans will typically involve multiple channels of communication like mailings, radio, TV, and newspaper ads.
- Abstract objectives will be avoided in meeting announcements. Specific "attention-grabbing" reasons to attend will be used, such as "Help us figure out how to create additional transportation options" or "How much should it cost to ride the bus?"
- Efforts will be made to show how the input of participants can, or did, influence final decisions.
- We will do our best to form decision-making committees that look like and relate to the populations we serve.

- We will seek out and identify community contacts and partner with local community- and faith-based organizations that can represent, and help us disseminate information to, target constituencies.
- Demographic data will be requested during public meetings, surveys, and from community contacts and committee members.

Public Meetings

“Public meeting” refers to any meeting open to the public, such as hearings, charrettes, open house and board meetings.

- Public meetings will be conducted at times, locations, and facilities that are convenient and accessible.
- Meeting materials will be available in a variety of predetermined formats to serve diverse audiences.
- An assortment of advertising means may be employed to inform the community of public meetings.
- Assistance to persons with disabilities or limited English proficiency will be provided, as required.

Small Group Meetings

A small group meeting is a targeted measure where a meeting is held with a specific group, usually at their request or consent. These are often closed meetings, as they will typically occur on private property at the owner’s request.

- If it is determined that a targeted group has not been afforded adequate opportunities to participate, the group will be contacted to inquire about possible participation methods, including a group meeting with them individually.
- Unless unusual circumstances or safety concerns exist, hold the meeting at a location of the target group’s choosing.
- Share facilitation duties or relinquish them to members of the target group.
- Small group discussion formats may be integrated into larger group public meetings and workshops. When this occurs, the smaller groups will be as diverse as the participants in the room.

Community Surveying

- Opinion surveys will occasionally be used to obtain input from targeted groups or the general public on their transportation needs, the quality or costs of our services, and feedback on our public outreach efforts.
- Surveys may be conducted via telephone, door-to-door canvassing, at community fairs, by placing drop boxes in ideal locations, or with assistance from other local agencies like social services.