

V. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT STRATEGY AND AGENCY COORDINATION

A. Public Involvement

Public involvement is a key element of the Nice Bridge Improvement Project. Currently, the Nice Bridge serves residents in the project study area as well as commuters and others traveling through Maryland and Virginia. As the project progresses, the study team will continue to provide information to and interact with the public through the following:

- Project newsletters / postcards;
- Project information locations (i.e. libraries, welcome centers);
- Meetings with communities, upon request;
- Focus Group meetings;
- Public workshops and public hearings; and,
- Project webpage.

Public outreach activities provide an opportunity for the public to learn about the project and understand how the project may affect their communities. Outreach also involves gaining feedback from the public in order to incorporate their concerns and views into the transportation decision making process.

In summer 2006, the project initiation announcement was published in regional and local newspapers in Charles County, Maryland and King George County, Virginia. Concurrently, residents and businesses in the study area received a flier announcing the initiation of the project planning study. The flier included a comment card that provided the public with the opportunity to mail a response with any comments, concerns or questions.

1. Project Newsletters and Postcards

Project newsletters are mailed periodically to residents within the Nice Bridge study area, as well as to those who have requested to be added to the project mailing list. Newsletters are designed to inform the community of the project status and schedule, provide study details, and can also serve as invitations to upcoming public events such as workshops or hearings.

Initially, when the study team receives a comment via standard mail, at a public meeting or the webpage, a postcard is mailed to the stakeholder acknowledging receipt of their comment. In addition to the postcards, detailed responses to comments are then provided, in a timely manner.

2. Project Information Locations

Project information will continue to be disseminated to the public at different key milestones of the project planning study. Six community facilities throughout the study area in both Maryland and Virginia were identified as locations where project announcements and other informational materials could be placed. Four of these locations (the Charles County Library – La Plata Branch, the Maryland Welcome Center, the Virginia Welcome Center in King George County and the L.E. Smoot Library in King George County) are intended to serve larger groups of the public including residents, commuters and visitors in the study area. The other two locations, the Aqua-Land General Store and the Shiloh Community Church, both in Newburg, Maryland were identified as locations to place information in order to reach residents at the Aqua-Land Marina and Campground and the residences along Shiloh Church Road,

respectively. Postcards announcing the spring 2007 Alternates Public Workshops were placed at each of these six locations. Brochures were delivered to the Shiloh Church, Aqua-Land Marina and Campground and the Virginia Visitor's Center.

3. Presentations to Stakeholders

As part of the study's outreach, if a stakeholder (e.g., communities, businesses, special interest groups, elected officials, local government entities) requests a presentation or meeting, the study team will honor that request. To date, presentations have been given to the following stakeholders:

- Upcoming: Presentation to Cub Scouts Troop in La Plata (date TBD)
- Western Charles County Business Association – May 8, 2007
- King George County Chamber of Commerce – March 12, 2007
- Southern Maryland Delegation – February 16, 2007
- Naval Support Facility Dahlgren – September 14, 2006
- King George County Board of Supervisors – August 15, 2006
- Charles County Commissioners – July 24, 2006
- Charles County Chamber of Commerce (Regional Transportation Committee) – June 15, 2006

4. Focus Group Meetings

In November 2006, a Focus Group was formed for the project. The purpose of the Focus Group was to gain a local perspective on the project from the stakeholders in the study area. The Focus Group consists of 17 members who are residents, business owners, elected officials, local government officials and representatives of special interest groups. The group does not issue formal recommendations or make decisions. However, by meeting regularly in a small group, members become knowledgeable of the planning process and applicable laws the Authority must comply with, and provide the study team with a valuable local perspective as the project planning study progresses.

Two Focus Group meetings have been held as of July 2007. Focus Group Meeting #1 was held on Tuesday, December 5, 2006 at the Dr. Thomas L. Higdon Elementary School in Newburg, Maryland. Focus Group Meeting #2 was held on Thursday, May 10, 2007 at Naval Support Facility Dahlgren in Dahlgren, Virginia. The project team will meet with the Focus Group two to three more times, alternating host state locations, throughout the project planning study. Meeting minutes from the Focus Group meetings are in **Appendix C**.

5. Public Workshops and Public Hearings

In spring 2007, newsletters and postcards were mailed to residents and businesses in the study area announcing the Alternates Public Workshops. The workshops were held near the Nice Bridge in Newburg, Maryland on May 31, 2007 and in Dahlgren, Virginia on June 7, 2007 for the public to review the purpose and need and the preliminary alternates, ask questions and provide comments to study team members. Over 80 people attended the May 31st workshop and over 45 people attended the June 7th workshop. Materials presented at the public workshops, as well as a summary of comments received, are located in **Appendix C**.

Over 30 comment cards were submitted during and after the workshops. The comments from the public provided valuable information regarding community facilities in the area, and questions and concerns regarding the Nice Bridge and the proposed preliminary alternates. The comments received

from the public at the Alternates Public Workshop are a key element in the decision making process for the Alternates Retained for Detailed Study (ARDS). Based on the study team's assessment, it was determined that there is strong support from the public for improvements to the bridge in the form of a build alternate. However, there was not one preliminary alternate preferred by a majority over another alternate, but rather a mix of preferences for having a new two-lane or four-lane crossing, south or north of the existing Nice Bridge. The study team took these various preferences into account during the ARDS process.

Upon completion of the draft environmental document, a Public Hearing will be held for interested parties to provide testimony on the document for the project record. Currently, the Public Hearings (Maryland and Virginia) are anticipated to take place in the Spring/Summer of 2008.

6. Project Webpage

The Nice Bridge Improvement Project webpage can be accessed through the Authority's main webpage (www.mdtransportationauthority.com). The project webpage features announcements, updates and information on the project, background on the study area, and an on-line comment form. To date, over 100 people have submitted comments to the study team via the webpage comment form.

B. Agency Coordination

On Thursday, October 12, 2006, the Nice Bridge Improvement Project team met with Federal, State (MD and VA) and Local agency representatives for a Project Scoping Meeting at the Charles County Department of Social Services in La Plata, Maryland. Agency representatives were presented with information on why the study is being conducted, how the study will evaluate different ways to improve the Nice Bridge, the known environmental and community resources and how the team is reaching out to the public. A question and answer session was held after the team's presentation. Several agencies asked the team to conduct further research on certain environmental issues. Other agencies provided input on additional environmental and community resources valuable to the Nice Bridge study area.

The Nice Bridge Improvement Project team will continue to find the best means to effectively communicate with these agencies throughout project planning. Typically, this is done through periodic interagency coordination meetings held prior to key project milestones. The Purpose and Need was presented at the interagency coordination meetings held in Virginia on January 22, 2007 and in Maryland on February 21, 2007.