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Case Study: Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission's Approach to Leveraging Public Outreach in Rural Transportation Planning

The Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission (SAP&DC) demonstrates the impact of meaningful and coordinated public engagement in a rural context. Published in 2018, the Alleghenies Ahead Comprehensive Plan identified critical issues that the region faces, several of which impact the ability for SAP&DC to conduct effective outreach.

In response to these issues, SAP&DC adopted the [Southern Alleghenies Rural Planning Organization Public Participation Plan \(PPP\)](#) in December 2020, outlining a proactive methodology for meaningful public involvement and ensuring that all segments of the population have an opportunity to comment on transportation-related public activities. This case study recognizes the specific actions and efforts undertaken by SAP&DC to utilize public outreach to maximize the impact of their planning efforts.

Background and Demographics

Encompassing a population of approximately 400,000 residents, SAP&DC covers a six-county region in west-central Pennsylvania, which includes Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Fulton, Huntingdon and Somerset Counties. For Bedford, Fulton, Huntingdon, and Somerset counties, the Southern Alleghenies Rural Planning Organization has also been the designated Rural Planning Organization (RPO) since 2003, which operates under SAP&DC. The RPO provides services to these counties, working with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) and county governments to identify transportation needs and priorities. This four-county region hosts a population of roughly 185,000. The remaining 215,000 residents live in Blair and Cambria Counties, which are served by the Altoona Metropolitan Planning Organization and the Cambria County Metropolitan Planning

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- The Alleghenies Ahead Comprehensive Plan was approved and adopted in 2018.
- In 2020, SAP&DC formally adopted a Public Participation Plan for involving constituents in the planning process.
- SAP&DC employs innovative strategies to conduct outreach in a rural planning setting.

STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH HIGHLIGHTS

- Recognizing that a significant portion of the region's population lacks internet access, SAP&DC has prioritized in-person engagement to support its planning activities.
- SAP&DC has tasked its steering committees to conduct a variety of targeted forms of outreach, including "kitchen table conversations" with over 400 constituents to better understand key needs.

Organization, respectively. The share of the region's residents below the federal poverty level is 13.7 percent, slightly higher than Pennsylvania's statewide average.¹

Within the RPO's four-county jurisdiction, there is no operational fixed-route transit lines, and options are limited in shared-ride, demand response, and private transportation services. When surveyed for a Coordinated Transit – Human Services Plan, 28 percent of respondents reported having no access to a personal vehicle, resulting in a lack of reliable and affordable transportation for a significant segment of the population. The region is at risk of falling behind the broadband internet accessibility rates when compared with other Pennsylvania counties. Access to internet service is a critical element of online public-involvement efforts, and the lack of access can lead to the exclusion of opinions.

In 2018, the [Alleghenies Ahead Regional Comprehensive Plan](#) was unanimously adopted by commissioners in all six counties. The plan highlights eight critical issues that face the region:

1. Broadband and Cellular Service
2. Collaboration and Coordination
3. Business and Workforce Development
4. Housing and Blight
5. Recreational Amenities and Natural Assets
6. Agriculture
7. Public Health and Safety
8. Transportation

Three of these categories, Broadband and Cellular Service, Collaboration and Coordination, and Business and Workforce Development, were identified as regionwide priorities, rather than pertaining to a specific county. The six-county region contains 237 municipalities with their own leadership, 114 of which are communities of under 1,000 residents. Combined with the existence of 170 other districts (e.g., utility and emergency services providers), the multiplicity of jurisdictions presents complications in coordinating and implementing regional initiatives.

Public Outreach Efforts in the Rural Planning Process

[Alleghenies Ahead Regional Comprehensive Plan](#)

SAP&DC's efforts to involve the public in the planning process have been at the forefront of its work over the past several years, spearheaded by a coordinated effort to include and amplify constituent voices. The development of Alleghenies Ahead was supported by an extensive outreach campaign conducted throughout the six-county region. A steering committee made up of 75 residents from around the region guided the development of the plan's elements and considerations. The committee members engaged in "kitchen table conversations" with over 400 of their acquaintances to gain a fuller understanding of the needs their communities face.

Supplemental to the steering committee was a combination of online and in-person outreach completed by consultants and local leaders. An online survey requesting feedback on the plan's scope collected over 1,100 responses. In addition to the survey, a week of in-person open-house events took place around the region, providing those without broadband access an opportunity to contribute their thoughts and suggestions. To reach stakeholders in key sectors of interest, smaller-scale conversations

¹ Southern Alleghenies Planning & Development Commission, [Regional Statistics](#).

took place with leaders throughout the region. These methods of outreach offered a comprehensive view of the needs for the Southern Alleghenies region.

Regional Housing Strategy

A supplemental plan for housing was published in February 2023 titled “[Alleghenies Ahead on Housing: A Regional Housing Strategy](#).” This plan, developed after a need was recognized for a regional approach to housing policy, built on the original comprehensive plan. In addition to a project advisory committee and discussions with local experts on topics of housing and economic development, an online survey was developed to receive constituent feedback. For this plan, SAP&DC received over 300 responses, with close-up analyses of each county included in the final plan.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan

The Southern Alleghenies RPO states in the 2021 update to their [Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan](#) that the agency is charged with operating a “multimodal transportation program,” which should address more than highway infrastructure. This iteration of the plan emphasizes the role active transportation takes in both recreational and commuting needs. The plan’s outreach efforts were shaped by an 11-member steering committee and a user survey to highlight challenges and opportunities.

Many smaller communities within the RPO boundary do not have a complete network of sidewalks. Through engagement with less populous municipalities, the organization mapped these gaps to properly visualize where connections in the active transportation network are missing. The plan identified the RPO as a clearinghouse for both large and small bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure projects. To ensure that rural municipalities are aware of the RPO’s capacity in this regard, SAP&DC has kept open communication with their municipalities, which is especially important when changes are made to existing conditions. Recently, ongoing maintenance was added as a developmental category, opening new funds to owners and maintainers of trail infrastructure. This also allows the maintenance of infrastructure to be properly considered in the development of future transportation initiatives.

One successful outcome of SAP&DC’s efforts to enhance the region’s pedestrian infrastructure is WalkWorks. This program, a partnership between the Pennsylvania Department of Health and Pennsylvania Downtown Center, is intended to “create a network of fun, fact-filled, community-based walking routes and walking groups.” Several of these safe walking routes exist within the RPO boundaries. Funding and technical and outreach assistance to help expand this network continues to be available through the Pennsylvania Department of Health.

Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Plan

In July 2016, a Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan was adopted by SAP&DC. This publication was a major update to the original report, which was first approved in June 2008. Candidate projects pursuing funding opportunities under the federal Enhanced Mobility for Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities (Section 5310) Program must be included in a coordinated plan.

For the 2016 update, SAP&DC used a “multi-pronged approach to stakeholder and public engagement,” which ensured the plan incorporated the needs of at-risk groups in the region, including senior citizens and persons with disabilities. Twenty members made up a steering committee representing a “broad spectrum of human services and transportation interests.” The commission hosted a series of listening sessions throughout the RPO’s jurisdiction, hearing firsthand from human services providers and the

actual or potential transportation user base on their needs and priorities for the region's transportation system. The commission also enlisted the use of identical online and paper surveys, as well as phone interviews to gather direct anecdotes of transportation experiences from users. The plan concluded with a set of issues and potential solutions. One of these issues is a "general lack of understanding of the inherent connection between transportation and human services," which could be addressed by including transportation service providers in human services council meetings and prompting greater interaction between county officials and service providers. The plan also includes a table of identified transportation gaps and action items to be taken, with specified timeframes on each item to allow for a tracked implementation process.

Local Technical Assistance Program

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) operates the Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP), which helps local municipalities maximize their roadway maintenance budgets. The program shares PennDOT's expertise in proven technologies with local governments at little or no cost to various planning bodies throughout Pennsylvania. SAP&DC partners with the Blair and Cambria County Planning Commissions each year to provide this service to local governments free of charge. The courses also contain pertinent information on grant and other funding opportunities. Roughly seven course types are offered, including active transportation, project oversight, and winter maintenance, and are located throughout SAP&DC's boundaries.

Long Range Transportation Plan

Developed in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), the 2022-2042 Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) is the latest for the Southern Alleghenies Region. This document, which receives an update every five years, guides the development and implementation of both the 12-Year Transportation Program and the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). A 25-year timeline allows the commission to predict future needs and areas of emphasis required within the Southern Alleghenies region, outlining a vision of future transportation goals.

A steering committee was formed to develop the plan, comprised of representatives from all levels of government and a variety of backgrounds, including PennDOT staff and freight and rail representatives from around the region. The Southern Alleghenies Rural Transportation Technical Committee and Rural Transportation Coordinating Committee also provided guidance and input at all parts of the plan development process. Consistent with SAP&DC's other planning processes, extensive public consultation was undertaken both online and in person. The regional LRTP denotes all active and planned regional plans and policies that cover their jurisdictions, as to best coordinate efforts between these programs, including the Southern Alleghenies Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy and several plans listed in this study. The LRTP includes an analysis of regional trends in a variety of categories (transportation, economic, and demographic) and lists an inventory of infrastructure present in the region. The plan concludes with strategies and goals to consider when pursuing projects in the region, as well as performance measures to track project outcomes.

Public Engagement & Stakeholder Collaboration

Adopted in 2020, the Southern Alleghenies Rural Planning Organization Public Participation Plan combines strategies that have long been employed by SAP&DC into a document that sets forth standards to follow for public engagement procedures. The plan specifies priority population groups for

targeted engagement and shows visually where they are located, such as senior residents and concentrations of minority populations. The plan also outlines participation and engagement methods that the commission will use, including what mediums for advertising (e.g., newspapers and local digital messaging systems) and methods for public participation.

Due to the nature of operating in a rural context, the plan outlines a diverse toolkit to reach the region's constituents and stakeholders. An element that is not technical in nature but is no less important is an open and active line of communication between the commission and the region's municipalities and other local public sector entities. By maintaining frequent contact, municipalities and planning agencies alike can foster stronger, results-driven relationships. In the case of bridges, the commission recommends small municipalities communicate important projects with imminent need with counties and other stakeholders to insure they are assessed as a priority for the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

The commission ensures that online forms of communication are not the only options presented to constituents, acknowledging that they often receive much higher levels of engagement and feedback from in-person events. Some of the region's municipalities lack public spaces to stage in-person outreach, and the commission must find alternative ways to interact with and hear from residents. To ensure that municipalities are aware of ways they can pursue funding and to gauge community activity, SAP&DC employs a Community Capacity Coordinator, who meets with community leaders to assess what capacity concerns they may have. It is also the responsibility of this employee to conduct outreach, ensuring that municipalities understand elements of transportation projects such as the Transportation Improvement Program and discretionary grant opportunities.

There are specific outreach strategies that the commission employs when conducting communications. Information will be distributed through notices, physical mail, emails, and local news outlets. While information coming directly from the commission to constituents can be useful, it is preferred to be sent by a more local source, such as the counties within the region. A newer method of outreach for the upcoming 2025-2028 Transportation Improvement Program is the ArcGIS Reporting Hub Municipal Outreach Page, which maps elements considered for the TIP and helps residents and municipal leaders understand what the TIP is and how it affects their neighborhoods.

Next Steps

The commission will continue to seek projects and goals highlighted by SAP&DC and their partners in the 2018 Alleghenies Ahead Comprehensive Plan, as well as the supplemental housing plan and Bike and Pedestrian Plan.

The public outreach phase is active for the Southern Alleghenies Coordinated Transit – Human Services Plan. There is currently no fixed-route transit within the four-county region of the RPO, and the region is actively seeking ways to address transportation gaps without fixed-route services. Additionally, SAP&DC is updating its Greenways and Open Space Network Plan and has recently completed an RPO-wide sidewalk inventory, with the hope of utilizing this data to identify and close gaps in sidewalk coverage for member jurisdictions.

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Resources

[Southern Alleghenies Rural Planning Organization Public Participation Plan \(PPP\)](#)

[Alleghenies Ahead Regional Comprehensive Plan](#)

[Southern Alleghenies Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan](#)

[Alleghenies Ahead: Regional Housing Strategy](#)

Pennsylvania WalkWorks Program:

[Pennsylvania Department of Health program page](#)

[Pennsylvania Downtown Center program page](#)