



Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands
Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority
Office of the Governor



"Driving You Forward"

Updated

Policy on Public Participation and Comment (Public Participation Plan)

Introduction and Policy Statement

The Commonwealth Office of Transit (COTA) is committed to providing an open and visible decision-making process to which Northern Mariana Islands residents have equal access. Therefore, it is the policy of the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority to actively solicit the involvement of citizens in the public decision-making process, through public notification, media exposure, village meetings and public hearings.

Further, it is the policy of the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority to offer early and continuous opportunities for the public to be involved in the identification of social, economic, and environmental impacts of proposed transportation decisions. This includes seeking out and considering the viewpoints of minority, low-income, and limited English proficiency (LEP) populations (as well as older adults and people with limited mobility) in the course of conducting public outreach activities, consistent with Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Circular 4702.1B ("Title VI Requirements and Guidelines for Federal Transit Administration Recipients").

Background and Purpose

The purpose of this plan is to promote public involvement in transit planning decision-making activities. This plan will establish formal procedures that allow for, encourage, and monitor public participation within the COTA service are including, but not limited to, minority individuals, persons with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and low-income populations. This document describes proactive public outreach strategies and procedures.

The foundation for these efforts is stated in **Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964**:

“ . . . No person in the United States shall, on the basis of race, color, or national origin be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program receiving Federal financial assistance. . . ”

-Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (42 U.S.C. 2000)

Further reinforcement was established by the President’s 1994 Executive Order on Environmental Justice, which states:

“ . . . Each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations. . . ”

-Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, 1994

Public Involvement Plan

It shall be the policy of the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority that, when a project, services, program or issue may have identifiable impacts on a neighborhood or citizen group, a Public Involvement Plan shall be submitted to the Office of the Special Assistant for Public Transportation at the beginning of the project or program. The Plan shall be designed to:

1. Ensure responsiveness to the level of interest and concern expressed by the public;
2. Ensure visibility and understanding by the agencies, groups and individuals who may participate; and
3. Ensure that public involvement is carefully and systematically included as part of the decision-making process

Public Involvement Principles

The following principles will be used to develop the Public Involvement Plan for the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority projects and programs:

- When a project (e.g., construction activity) may affect a neighborhood, special neighborhood meetings will be scheduled early in the project planning process. Notices will be sent to organized neighborhood groups and any individual who has requested notification.

- All public hearing notices shall be written in clear, concise and understandable language and will incorporate graphics when it aids the message. The notices will clearly be identified as a Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority notice.
- The Public Involvement Plan will reflect the COTA's policy to provide early and continuous opportunities for the public to be involved in the identification of the impacts of proposed decisions. It will also reflect the COTA's policy to seek out the viewpoints of minority, low-income, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) populations, as well as older adults and people with limited mobility, in the course of conducting public outreach and involvement activities, consistent with the COTA's Title VI Program, Executive Order 13166 on access for individuals with Limited English Proficiency, and U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) LEP Guidance.
- The Public Involvement Plan will be tailored to the populations affected and the type of plan, program, or service under consideration.
- Public meetings will be held in locations that are accessible to transit riders and people with disabilities, and will be scheduled at times that convenient for members of the public.
- Public meetings and hearings will be broadly advertised in the community in both English, Chamorro and Carolinian (e.g., through posters onboard buses and at major transit stops and facilities, the COTA's website, local print media, social media, and email notification to the COTA's outreach mailing list) and notification will be provided regarding the availability of language assistance.

Goals, Objectives and Desired Outcomes for Public Participation

The goal of the plan is to offer a variety of opportunities for the general public to engage in transit planning and decision-making activities at COTA in accordance with FTA Circular 4702. 1B Chapter III-5 Promoting Inclusive Public Involvement. The objectives of the plan are as follows:

- To determine what non-English languages and other barriers may exist to public participation within the Northern Mariana Islands.
- To provide a general notification of meetings, particularly forums for public input, in a manner that is understandable to all populations in the area.
- To hold meetings in locations which are accessible and reasonably welcoming to all area residents, including, but not limited to, LEP, and low-income members of the public.
- To utilize a variety of communication methods to capture public input from populations which are typically not likely to attend or engage in public meetings.
- Provide a range of opportunities and venues for public participation, including in-person and online engagement.
- Identify and engage key audiences and constituencies for transportation planning information and feedback.
- Connect with a broad range of residents that is reflective of the demographics and geography of the region.

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- Elicit input from identified audiences and constituencies regarding regional transportation policies and planning.
 - Educate stakeholders and the general public about the COTA's role in regional transportation policies and planning.

Public participation includes a broad range of activities geared to inform stakeholders, interested parties, and the general public about a topic and providing opportunities for the public at-large, as well as specific stakeholders, to participate and engage in the processes used to create policies. Technology is increasingly used to connect with audiences, and the rapidly changing nature of technology means new methods and communications channels become available regularly.

Identification of Stakeholders

Stakeholders are those who are either directly or indirectly affected by a plan, project, services or program based on decisions related to recommendations or implementation actions. Those who may be adversely affected or who may be denied benefit of a plan's recommendation(s) are of particular interest in the identification of specific stakeholders.

General stakeholders within the COTA service area include, but are not limited to:

- Major Employers
- College and School Districts
- Non-profit and private business community
- Public (including minority, LEP, and low-income populations)
- Commonwealth Public Transportation Advisory Board Meetings
- Transit Advocates

The COTA staff periodically meets with social service providers, transit advocates, public members, and other agencies through forums such as the Commonwealth Public Transportation Advisory Board meetings and CNMI Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Direct Stakeholders

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 53,883 residents exist within the Northern Mariana Islands as indicated in the table below:

Geographic Area	Total Pop	White	Black	Asian	Hawaiian & Pacific Islanders	Other	Two or More Ethnic Origins or races	Hispanic
Saipan	48220	1021	45	24562	16210	109	6227	46
Tinian	3136	57	6	1463	1222	8	374	6
Rota	2527	39	4	883	1368	0	231	2

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census

1.2% of the population identifies as two or more races.

Techniques utilized to engage the general population includes public notices of meetings in the local newspapers, on the COTA website, via social media, Survey Monkey, Route Match's innovative intelligent transportation system.

Minority Populations

In reference to the table above, minority populations comprise over half (30,354 or 56.3 percent) of the percentage of the population in the Northern Mariana Islands. Asian individuals are the largest minority, with 49.9 percent of the total population. This total includes Filipinos with 19,017; 3,659 Chinese; 2,253 Koreans; 1,979 other Asians. A small number of Hawaiian and Pacific Islander individuals account for 3,437 or 6.4 percent. Persons who consider themselves to be of more than one race account for 1.2 percent of the total population.

LEP Populations

Per COTA's newly incorporated Limited English Proficiency Plan (LEP), reasonable efforts will be made to engage LEP populations using techniques such as the development of public notices in appropriate non-English languages that will provide contact information where individuals can be informed of the affected project or services to provide input or comments. Other efforts could include conducting focus groups in concentrations of LEP populated areas may also be established for the purpose of gaining input from a particular defined portion of the community. In addition, non-profit organizations and other advocacy groups can be utilized to disseminate information to LEP populations. Such non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, or other organizations can provide insight into the needs of LEP populations.

Low-income Populations

To ensure low-income households are not under-served, COTA will ensure that low-income populations will be given every reasonable opportunity to provide input on transportation plans and programs to avoid disproportionate harm, or lack of benefit, of transportation programs and projects.

In summary, methods of gaining input either directly or indirectly from minority, LEP, and low-income population groups include a wider range of notification techniques, focus group meetings or informal interviews, if required, and the use of agency or advocacy group contacts through non-profit or private organizations.

Public Comment Process for Fare Increases and major Service Changes

Consistent with FTA Circular 9040.1G, it shall be the policy of the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority to solicit public opinion and consider public comment before raising fares or implementing a major service change. A public hearing is required prior to implementation of a fare increase or a major service change. A “major” service change is defined as a modification that affects 25% or more of a single route, or 25% or more of all routes. Additional public involvement strategies, such as public meetings, village meetings, or other outreach to affected individuals will be implemented as appropriate to solicit public comment for consideration in advance of the public hearing. Public comments received will be compiled and considered prior to finalizing the COTA’s recommendation to the Commonwealth Public Transportation Advisory Board (CPTAB) regarding a fare increase or major service change. A summary of the public comments received will be provided as a part of the staff report submitted to CPTAB for the fare increase or major service reduction in question.

The public hearing will be scheduled as part of a regular Commonwealth Public Transportation Advisory Board meeting, and advertised broadly through the COTA’s website, the COTA’s island wide outreach mailing list, and poster and flyers to be posted at conspicuous public locations, on buses/vans, and at bus stops. The hearing will also be advertised through targeted outreach to neighborhood groups or other organizations and individuals, as appropriate to the proposed change. Notices regarding the public hearing will be the provided in both English, Chamorro and Carolinian. The Special Assistant for Communications & Protocol/Governor’s Press Secretary will additionally post notice of the public hearing in the Executive Branch Website at www.gov.mp.

The following procedures, strategies, techniques, and media will be utilized to engage and notify the public in the public hearing process prior to CPTAB approval:

- Place printed materials on buses: interior cards, flyers, and/or comment cards describing the proposed changes.
- Information available on website.
- Social media outlets: email blasts, Facebook, Twitter.
- Press releases and meetings with local media representatives.
- Presentations to professional, citizen, and student organizations.

- User and non-user surveys.
- Use of various illustrative visualization techniques to convey the information, including, but not limited to, charts, graphs, photos, maps, and the Internet.

Additional information on process for soliciting public comment on service changes

Proposed service changes are developed by the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority staff. Once proposals are finalized, printed information is created that explains the proposed changes. These informational materials (available in English, Chamorro and Carolinian) are placed on the buses and used as handouts at public informational meetings and hearings. Flyers and posters that direct interested individuals to these materials are also posted on the buses, at COTA's offices, and are provided to facilities (libraries, senior citizen centers, human service organizations, schools, etc.) which are likely to be impacted by the service changes.

Any interested individual is invited to make comments. Comments may be submitted in person at the public informational meetings and public hearings. They may also be submitted by mail and by Comment Card. In addition, comments may be submitted over the phone to COTA's representatives, via email, and online via the Authority's website.

Information about scheduled public meetings is and will be available via:

1. Bus posters
2. Bus stop posters
3. CPTAB meeting agenda
4. Posters in COTA offices
5. COTA website
6. Appropriate venues, such as senior centers, human service organizations, and schools
7. Email notification and social media

All comments received are reviewed by COTA's staff and considered in the final decisions. The goal of the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority is to always provide the best possible service to the most current riders or potential riders.

Conclusion

This document will serve as Public Participation Plan for the COTA. A public comment period to obtain input in regards to the proposed plan will be forty five (45) days. The announcement of the plan will be advertised in a manner reasonably expected to reach the general public including minorities, LEP, and low-income populations prior to approval by the CPTAB or the Special Assistant for Public Transportation.

The plan will be available for review on the COTA website, <https://cnmicota.wixsite.com/cota-mp> and at the COTA administrative office. If the materials are requested in LEP languages and in alternative format such as Braille, large type print, audio/CD recording, and/or Braille, staff will make these documents readily available and will make every reasonable attempt to accommodate those needs.

Members of the public can also obtain information about the plan by contacting COTA by phone at (670) 664-2686 (COTA), One-Call/One-Click Transportation Information Service Center by dialing a soon-to-be-assigned 3-Digit number, email at cota@gov.mp, or via standard mail to Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority, Caller Box 10007, Saipan, MP 96950. For callers with speech or hearing impaired, please dial 7-1-1 to access the Telecommunication Relay Services to speak to a Operator Assistant.

Reviewed and Approved by,

Date: 10/1/19



ALFREDA P. CAMACHO

Special Assistant for Public Transportation

RALPH DLG. TORRES
Governor



ARNOLD I. PALACIOS
Lieutenant Governor

COMMONWEALTH of the NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 18, 2019

Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Policy Plan and Public Participation Plan

Governor Ralph DLG. Torres and Lt. Governor Arnold I. Palacios through the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority (COTA) would like to notify the general public that COTA is updating its Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Policy Plan and Public Participation Plan.

A copy of the LEP and the Public Participation Plan can be obtained at the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority. Written comments must be submitted directly to the Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority, Suite 216, Marianas Business Plaza, Susupe, Saipan or via email to: alfreda.camacho@gov.mp no later than July 1, 2019, 2:00 p.m.

For any questions, please contact Mr. Diego Songsong, COTA Community Planner, at (670) 664-2682.

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The Reunion Mass is on Thursday, June 20, 2019, at 5pm at the Kristo Rai Church. We are inviting families of our deceased classmates to join us to also light their memorial candles during Mass. Immediately after the Mass, there will be a reunion gathering at the residence of the Ivan Propst couple in Susupe.

On Saturday, June 22, 2019, All Class of '89 and their families are invited to a family reunion picnic at Minachum Atdào, Civic Center Beach beginning at 9am.

Contact Gernadine Camacho at (670) 783-4465 for more information. (PR)

Comments sought on COTA plan to update limited English proficiency policy, plan

The Commonwealth Office of Transit Authority is updating its Limited English Proficiency Policy Plan and Public Participation Plan. A copy of the LEP and the Public Participation Plan can be obtained at COTA. Written comments must be submitted directly to COTA, Suite 216, Marianas Business Plaza, Susupe, Saipan or via email to: alfreda.camacho@gov.mp no later than July 1, 2019, 2pm. For any questions, contact Diego Songsong, COTA community planner, at (670) 664-2682. (PR)

\$6M in tax refunds in Guam out since Monday

Last Monday, June 17, the Department of Administration will mail over 1,800 tax refund checks totaling approximately \$6 million including refunds garnished to repay government debts for error free returns filed on or before Feb. 4, 2019.

For inquiries, contact income tax branch, Department of Revenue & Taxation at 671-635-1840 or Mr. Edward Birn, Department of Administration at 671-475-1250. (PR)



Press Release

News under Press Release are official statements issued to Saipan Tribune giving information on a particular matter.

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