



[Join \(/join/\)](#)  
[Log In \(/login/?next=/planning/2021/fall/lessons-from-transportation-planners%27-pivot-to-virtual-engagement/\)](/login/?next=/planning/2021/fall/lessons-from-transportation-planners%27-pivot-to-virtual-engagement/)



[MENU](#)

Search

[Home \(/\)](#) > [Knowledge Center \(/knowledgecenter/\)](/knowledgecenter/) > [APA Publications \(/publications/\)](/publications/) > [Planning Magazine \(/planning/\)](/planning/) >

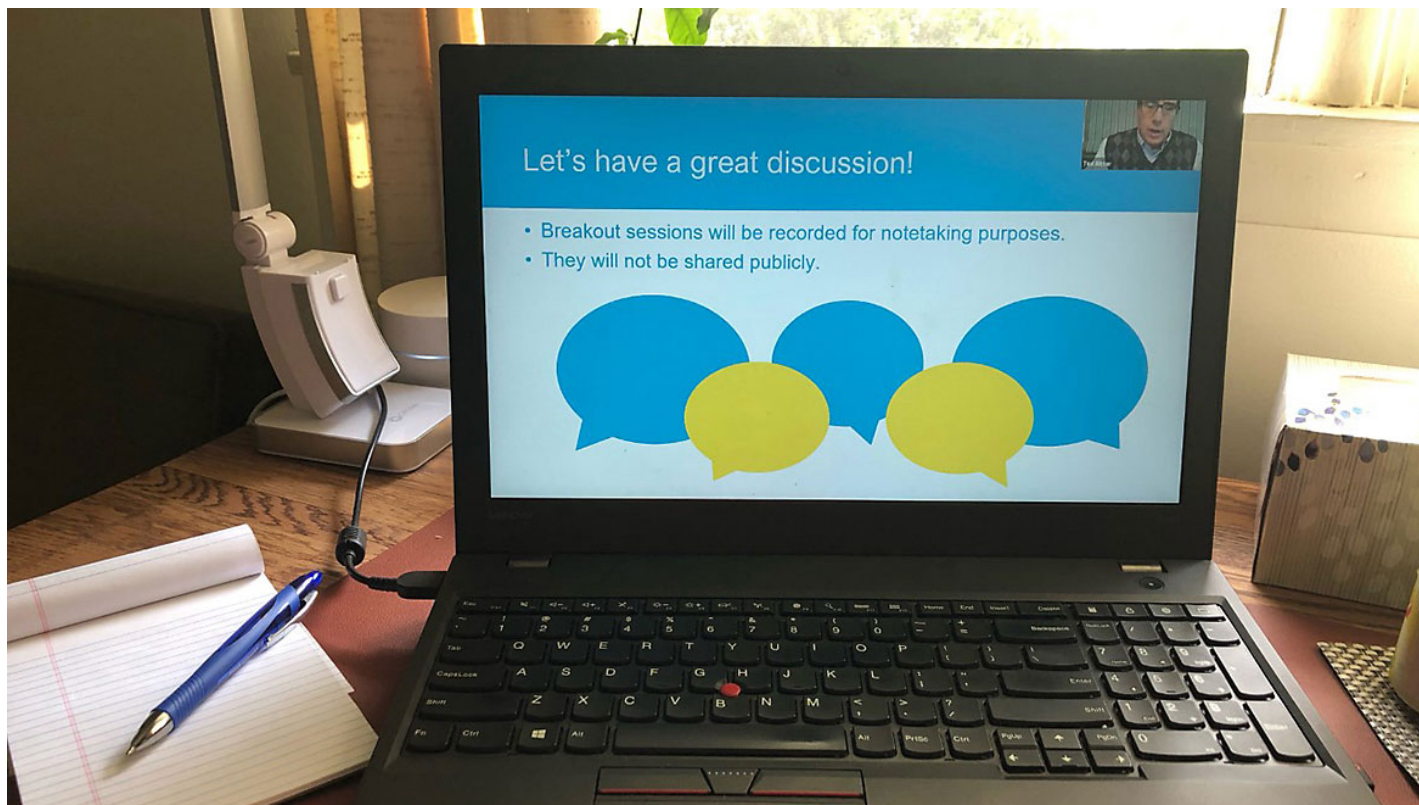
PLANNING MAGAZINE

# Lessons From Transportation Planners' Pivot to Virtual Engagement

*Forced to innovate by the Covid-19 pandemic, experts say these public participation innovations are here to stay.*

SHARE THIS ARTICLE

[TOOLS \(/PLANNING/SECTION/TOOLS/\)](/planning/section/tools/) [ENGAGEMENT](#)



Creating "bite-sized" visuals and opportunities for breakout discussions are two ways planners reimagined public engagement online. Photo courtesy of NJTPA.

**Oct. 1, 2021**

By MARISA DENKER; ADRIENNE ZICKLIN KANTER, MSUP

When Robert Moses spearheaded the design and building of the Cross Bronx Expressway in New York without giving East Tremont or Crotona Park community members a voice, those neighborhoods were razed in its wake. More than 50 years later, it remains a haunting lesson for those in the planning profession.

Public engagement has since become a well-established state and federally mandated tool for transportation projects around the country, allowing planners to better understand and improve upon their designs' impact on those who will live with them. Public involvement also encourages a feeling of community ownership of the project at hand and has the potential to ripple positive impacts out to the wider neighborhood. It also helps to dispel misinformation and misinterpretation, which can encourage buy-in and help a project succeed.

Outreach practices have become more robust over the years, with more focus on reaching socioeconomically and racially marginalized groups. But 2020 was a watershed year. The Covid-19 pandemic forced planners to reevaluate and reimagine [public engagement](https://www.apanews.com/9198750/new-online-public-engagement-resources/) ([/apanews/9198750/new-online-public-engagement-resources/](https://www.apanews.com/9198750/new-online-public-engagement-resources/)).

Traditional wisdom has long held that in-person engagement was essential, in part because of the [digital divide](https://www.podcast.com/how-covid-19-has-underlined-the-digital-divide/) ([/podcast/how-covid-19-has-underlined-the-digital-divide/](https://www.podcast.com/how-covid-19-has-underlined-the-digital-divide/)), which limits access to public processes, particularly for marginalized populations. However, the sudden and extended lockdown forced planners to quickly pivot to remote engagement, and Zoom, Teams, WebEx became household names. It also meant that planners were able to experiment and assess in real time the impact of virtual public participation.

The authors spoke with transportation policy makers, planners, and public outreach specialists at public agencies in the Northeast about this culture shift. A few notable trends emerged.

## Virtual engagement is worthwhile

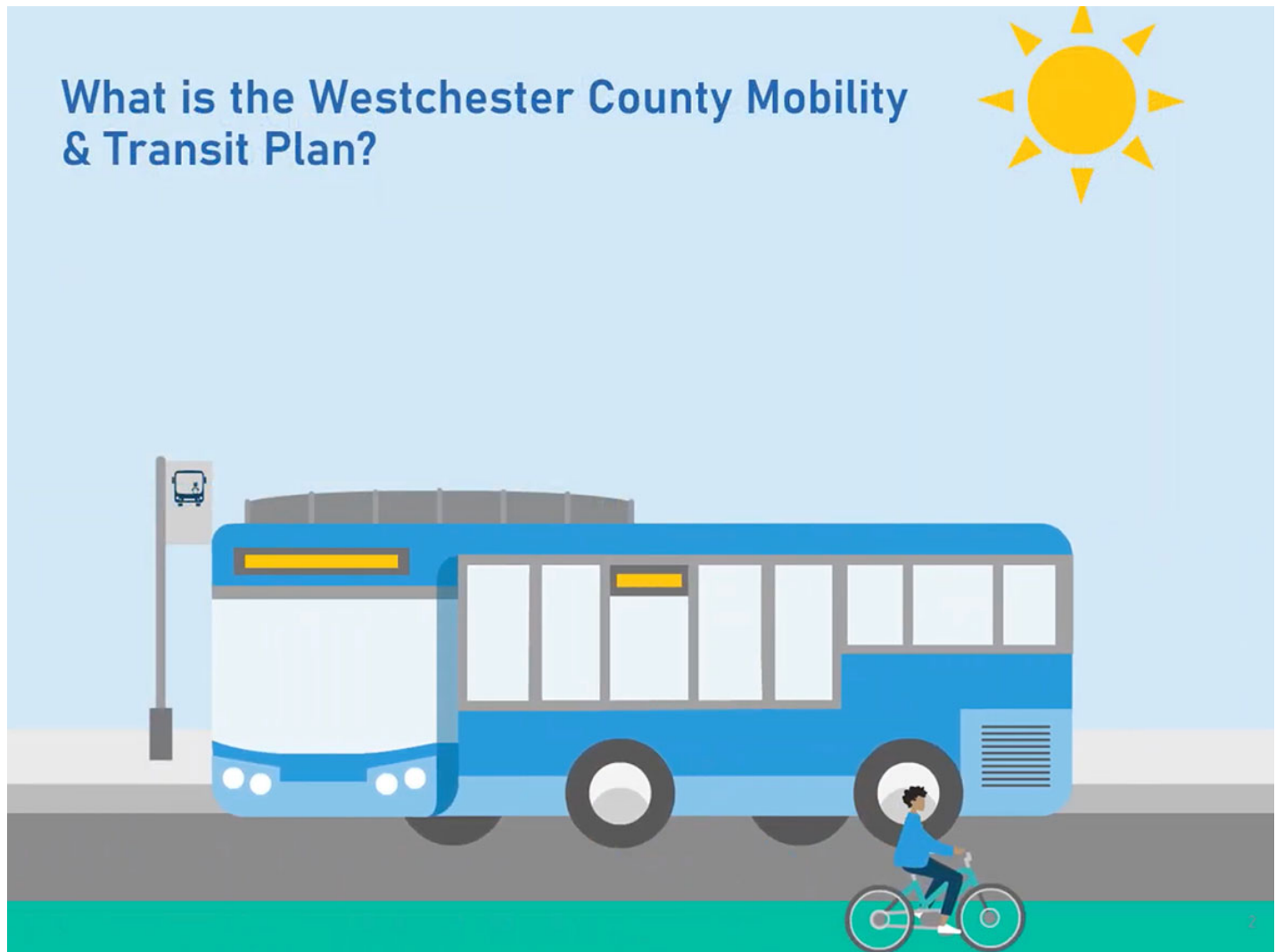
Darnell Tyson, P.E., was surprised by the turnout he saw when an evening event at the local library was transformed into a Zoom meeting taking place in living rooms all over Suffolk County, New York. He wasn't alone. This began happening all over the country, and planners and other experts saw some real benefits.

Tyson is Suffolk County's chief deputy commissioner of the department of public works. As he thinks back to the abrupt shift to virtual communications, he says that "it became clear that people will find a means to make their points heard as long as there is a phone and a link."

In fact, smart phones have become a critical tool for public engagement, especially in neighborhoods where home internet access is scarce. A 2019 survey of Westchester Bee Line bus passengers found that over 80 percent of riders owned a smart phone, including those with lower incomes. The survey found that 45 percent of riders made less than \$25,000 per year.

Indeed, many planners and public engagement experts describe immediately observing a significant increase in public meeting attendance as participation shifted to virtual, whether participants joined on their phones or with at-home internet service.

There are a few likely reasons for that bump in engagement, says Naomi Klein, the director of transportation planning in Westchester County, New York. She points out that online meetings demand less from participants, both in time and commitment, since there's no travel involved. Virtual events also mean that they don't need to leave children and other family members unattended, opening new doors to a wider array of participants in such processes.



Websites and videos like the one explaining [Westchester County's transportation plan](https://www.westchestermobility.org/) (<https://www.westchestermobility.org/>) are meant to act as a type of public meeting. Image courtesy of Westchester County Department of Planning.

Agencies and consultants also post videos and online surveys to their websites, broadening access outside of traditional evening workshop or meeting times. Melissa Hayes, senior manager of public outreach at North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA), notes another opportunity-opening aspect of virtual meetings: They can be recorded and viewed at any time.

Increasingly, agencies are making use of remote meeting breakout rooms, where people can talk about their specific concerns — and do so at a scale that's more manageable and focused. The chat function offers yet another avenue for the public to convey their questions and get answers, says Blythe Eaman, AICP, principal planner at NJTPA.

Methods have continued to improve the quality of these meetings and other types of communication over the past year and a half. That means presenters must perfect their approach, too.

Be mindful of conveying ideas in more "bite-size" quantities for the audience to digest, cautions Zenobia Fields, senior policy and program advisor at the New Jersey DOT. Suffolk County's Tyson emphasizes the importance of sharing information visually, while Klein from Westchester County adds that asking for people to keep their cameras on during virtual meetings increases the likelihood that people engage.

Planners we spoke to shared another interesting observation: Those who take part in virtual meetings also differ demographically from those whom planners and transportation professionals are accustomed to seeing at town halls and similar events. Virtual meetings definitely have drawn a larger, broader audience. That is a good start, but Zenobia Fields notes that participants nevertheless are still predominately white-collar professionals. Thus, there remains a need to plan alternatives to straddle the digital divide.

An unexpected benefit that Fields notes is that online events often can better accommodate people with physical or mobility limitations, one of several factors that suggest virtual meetings will continue to have a role even after the pandemic is over.

Another positive? The tenor of the virtual meetings is different, and notably, it is much harder to grandstand on Zoom. Further, meetings facilitators can control a conversation heading in an inappropriate or unproductive direction, by hitting the mute button.

## **There's a special energy from being together**

The character of online meetings, Zoom fatigue, and the digital divide are what cause many planners and public engagement staff to yearn for a return to in-person gatherings.

Paul Wiedefeld, general manager/CEO of Metro at the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) says he "misses the spontaneity that comes from many people gathered together." Hector Garcia, senior director of external affairs at Long Island Rail Road, agrees. "COVID has reinforced the need to engage," as well as the importance of personal connections and the trust that comes with that, Garcia says.



In-person engagements can build personal connections and trust, notes Hector Garcia (in yellow tie) of Long Island Rail Road. Photo courtesy of LIRR.

There is a certain irreplaceable messiness to robust, in-person meetings that contributes to more inclusive, thoughtful, and deeper feedback from the community, says Jennifer Dougherty, AICP, manager of Long Range Planning at Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). The ancillary discussion is an essential part of this. There is a richness and depth that occurs when people are in the same physical space. It yields insights, clarifications, and connections in a way that cannot be achieved virtually, Dougherty says.

That human connection has other benefits, says Garcia. "It's a safety valve — people know they can reach out to someone if they have questions or concerns. Otherwise, a situation can escalate quickly," he adds.

Garcia continues to make one-on-one connection the hallmark of his public engagement strategy. He often stays at large public meetings until each person has had the chance to express their concerns and feel heard. That, clearly, is much more doable in person.

He points to the role of body language, nonverbal cues, and organic interaction between presenters and the audience when people are physically in the same room. Garcia says he feels "like a comedian, constantly paying attention to the audience to gauge their reaction. I can do that for in-person, but not virtual engagement."

## Hybrid is the future

Planners and public outreach specialists consistently say they anticipate a hybrid strategy in the future. "A multi-pronged approach is most effective," says Westchester County transportation planning director Naomi Klein.

One reason is that comfort levels vary, with some people feeling more comfortable standing at a microphone in an auditorium and others more likely to engage by entering a question or comment in an online chat. That's a case for offering both options. NJTPA's manager of external affairs, Ted Ritter, offers a caveat: Virtual engagement is typically more cost effective than in-person and it is better suited to less controversial projects.

Socioeconomic status also plays a significant role. Josh Lecar, assistant planning director at Naugatuck Valley Council of Governments, notes that, in his experience, home and business owners — those who have a vested financial interest in their communities — often make it a priority to attend public meetings if their investment is going to be affected in any way. Virtual engagement might also have lower barriers to entry for higher income households with greater access to the internet and control over their time.

For people with lower incomes, there may be more pressing concerns that make attending a public meeting a luxury, regardless of the format. Providing babysitting or food, better achieved through in-person gatherings, may accommodate people with fewer resources and give them the chance to learn and participate in the planning process.

## Engagement is more than just meetings

Not all public engagement comes in the form of formal meetings. Hector Garcia has continued to invest much of his time, even during the pandemic, in meeting people where they are. He stays outside, but goes door-to-door in neighborhoods, establishing relationships, creating trust, and taking the time to inform and respond to people individually.



During an outdoor open house in downtown Jamaica, Queens, planners were able to reach a broader audience on a plan for busways in the area. Photo courtesy NYC DOT.

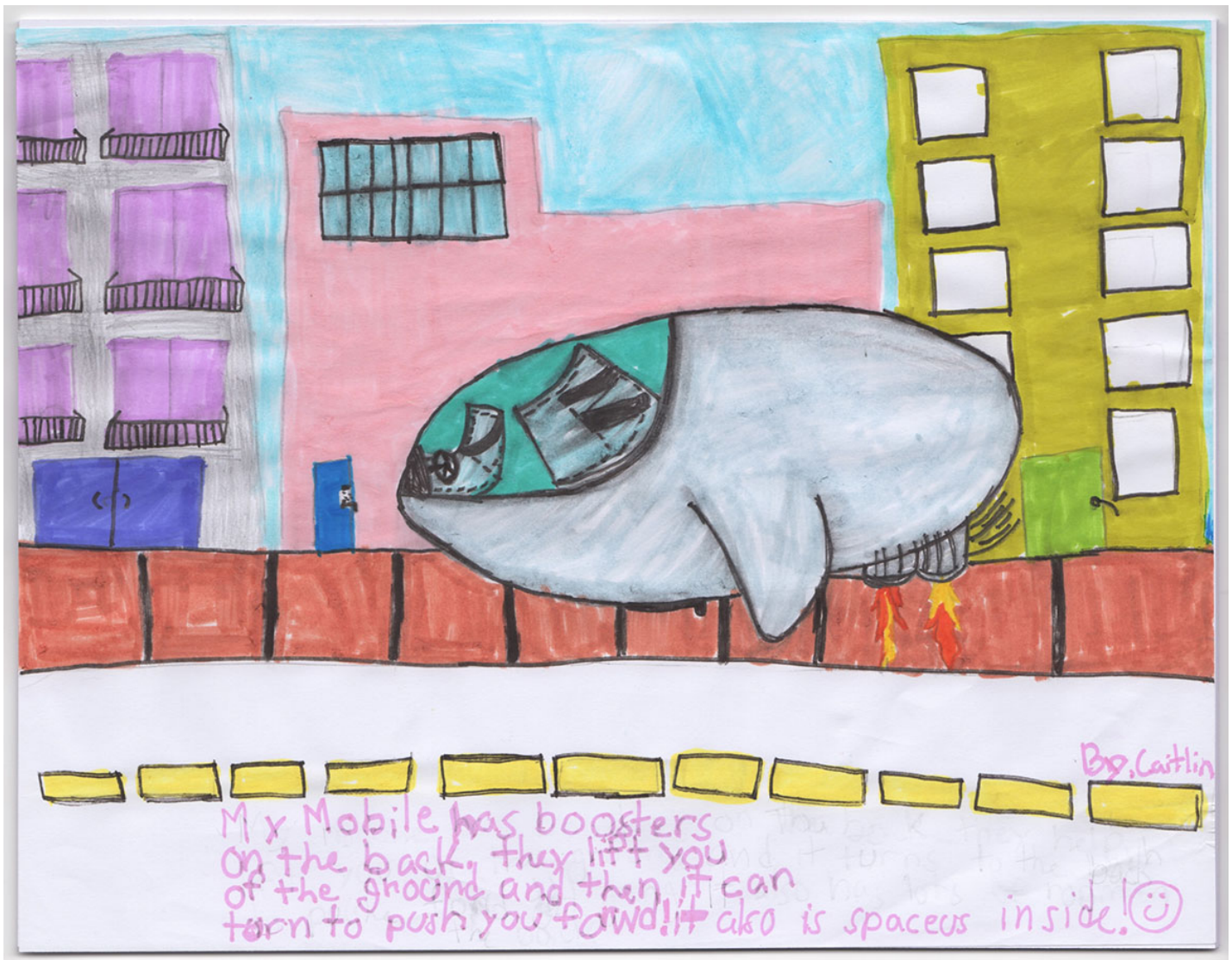
Many planners and public outreach specialists emphasize that street [ambassador programs](https://www.planning.org/planning/2021/summer/how-to-overcome-local-pushback-on-climate-action/) ([/planning/2021/summer/how-to-overcome-local-pushback-on-climate-action/](https://www.planning.org/planning/2021/summer/how-to-overcome-local-pushback-on-climate-action/)) can reach parts of the population that meetings cannot. Janet Jenkins, AICP, assistant commissioner of transit development at the New York DOT, says that she values the agency's strong on-street outreach program. "We are meeting the people where they are, broadening the cross-section of people we speak to. This gives us more balanced input on projects, especially if they're controversial," she says.

Waffiyah Murray, Better Bike Share Partnership program coordinator for Philadelphia's Office of Transportation, Infrastructure and Sustainability, confirms the impact of community ambassador programs. They are increasing equity, access, and trust-building in her city. Further, she says, the pandemic has reinforced the importance of investing in longer-term, supportive relationships with community members, rather than ones that are short-lived and transactional.



Covid-19 has also reminded us that creativity and flexibility matter. With regular group tours on hold, Feet First Philly (<https://feetfirstphilly.org/>), has had success with virtual scavenger hunts, says SEPTA's Jennifer Dougherty.

In New Jersey, planners are taking yet another approach. As part of its most recent long-term plan, NJTPA created an online competition for children and teens to imagine their visions of transportation in the future by submitting short videos, audio recordings, drawings, or poems. Planners at the metropolitan planning organization say they hope that engaging young people will be a catalyst for family discussion and involvement.



The NJTPA On Air Future of Transportation (<https://www.njtpa.org/onair>) contest received more than 150 submissions and the input received from participants is being incorporated into the next long-range transportation plan. Image courtesy of NJTPA.

No matter where engagement occurs or what form it takes, planners and public outreach specialists concur that getting the word out is key. "We did a much better job of purposely reaching sectors of the community that pre-COVID efforts missed," says WMATA's Paul Wiedefeld.

The same is true in Suffolk County, where Darnell Tyson notes that the public works department advertised its planning process on Long Island buses, as well as via e-blasts, and posts on the website. Posting signs at bus stops in Westchester, New York, were intended to reach not just riders, but the all the people driving past, says Naomi Klein.

Another strategy is leveraging partnerships with local community organizations. Many planners and public engagement specialists speak enthusiastically about the benefits of such collaborations, including Melissa Melora. The public outreach coordinator at the South Jersey Transportation Planning Organization (SJTPO) credits the MPO staff's reliance on "newly formed connections with local organizations and agencies for helping to bring awareness to our public outreach opportunities."

Those groups' strong community ties went far in helping to spread the word, and Melora wants those neighborhood partnerships to continue. "When life gradually returns to normal, we hope these newly formed connections continue to grow and strengthen our outreach processes."

## Meaningful engagement will remain vital

While those interviewed all came from different perspectives and experiences, they certainly agreed on one key message: Public engagement serves a vital purpose in the planning process and should never be pursued merely to check a box.

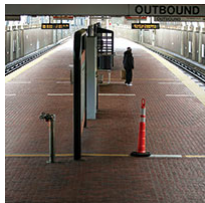
Successful public engagement should make the project or program go more easily, raise its profile, improve its design, and "make it a better project because you're hearing your customers' needs," says Dougherty from SEPTA in Philadelphia. "If you do all of that well, a whole host of people who have bought in and feel ownership and excitement about the project will be advocates."

The pandemic has necessitated responsive, flexible, and innovative approaches — and it seems that those new ways of engaging with communities are here to stay. There is no doubt that innovation will continue to best meet people where they are and enable equitable decision-making.

Marisa Denker (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/marisa-denker/>) is CEO and Director of Connect the Dots (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/connectthedotsinsights/?viewAsMember=true>), a WBE/DBE firm specializing in community and stakeholder engagement with an expertise in transportation, public realm, and economic development. Adrienne Zicklin Kanter (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/adrienne-zicklin-kanter-45012139/>) is NY Area Manager at Stokes Creative Group (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/stokes-creative-group-inc./>), a WBE/DBE full-service public engagement and communications firm specializing in transportation and the built environment. The authors would like to thank the interviewees for their time and expertise.

SHARE THIS ARTICLE

## RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



### INTERSECTIONS

Transit in Crisis (</planning/2020/dec/transit-in-crisis/>)

**Dec. 1, 2020**



### INTERSECTIONS

How COVID-19 Will Change Land Use  
(</planning/2020/dec/tools-legal-lessons/>)

**Dec. 1, 2020**

SIGN UP FOR PLANNING EMAILS

Receive Planning featured articles and recent content in your inbox

**Subscribe**  
(/myapa/contactpreferences/update/)







DOWNLOAD PLANNING MAGAZINE

Access the most recent issue. Download the digital version now.

**Log in to download**  
(/publications/document/9227433/)

 (<https://www.facebook.com/AmericanPlanningAssociation>)

 (<https://www.youtube.com/user/AmericanPlanningAssn>)  ([https://twitter.com/APA\\_Planning](https://twitter.com/APA_Planning))

 (<http://instagram.com/americanplanningassociation>)  (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/24456/>)



**Back to Top**

[Log In \(/login/?next=/\)](/login/?next=/)

[Contact Us \(/customerservice/\)](/customerservice/)

[Privacy Policy \(/apaataglace/privacy.htm\)](/apaataglace/privacy.htm)

© 2022 APA. All Rights Reserved (</apaataglace/copyright.htm>) | [Privacy Policy \(https://planning.org/privacy/\)](https://planning.org/privacy/) | [Advertise \(/advertise/\)](/advertise/)