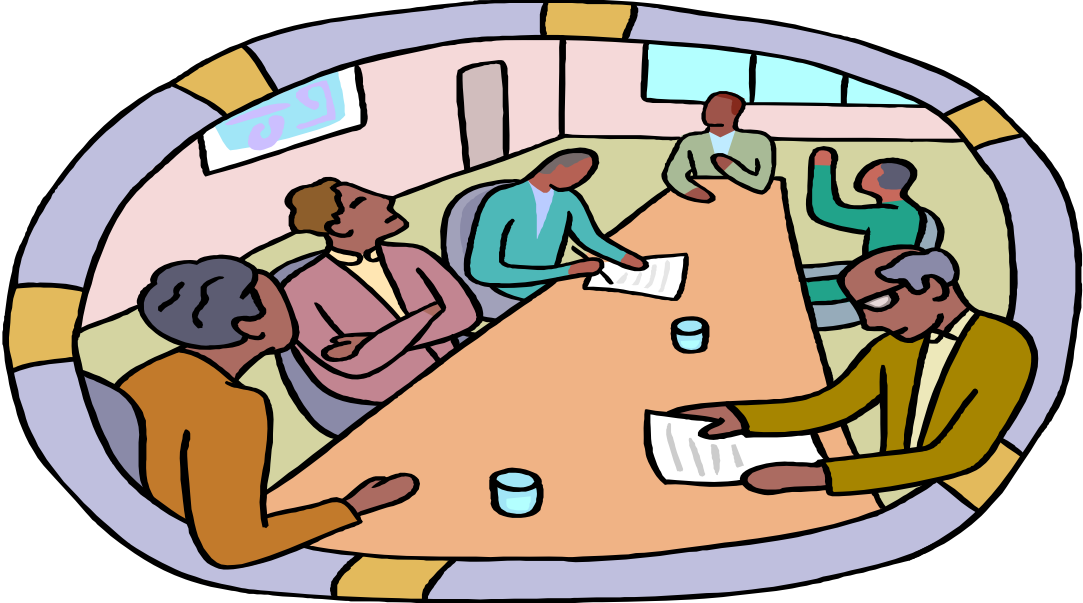


**Gadsden Etowah Metropolitan Planning Organization  
(GEMPO)**



**Public Involvement Plan**



# Gadsden Etowah Metropolitan Planning Organization (GEMPO)

## PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PLAN

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## I. PREFACE

The Gadsden Etowah Metropolitan Planning Organization's (GEMPO) policy is to have a proactive public involvement process that provides timely information and public notification for all Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) activities. Furthermore, it is GEMPO's policy to solicit early public involvement from the communities most affected by its plans, process and projects..

These policies are intended to inform the public of GEMPO's outreach efforts and guide GEMPO staff in involving the public in Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) planning and programming activities. These efforts include, but are not limited to: the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP); the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP); the Public Involvement Plan (PIP); and special local studies such as bicycle/pedestrian plans, corridor studies and transit studies.

As part of its general planning and programming process, GEMPO shall try to involve as broad a cross-section of the population and the region as possible such as: citizens, member municipalities, affected public agencies, public and private transportation providers, representatives of transportation agency employees or unions, freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled and other interested parties. For special studies, GEMPO shall make an effort to identify and involve individuals and groups that might be affected by potential changes to the particular transportation service or facility under review, in addition to those engaged through the general planning process. Examples include abutting property owners, neighborhood associations, transit riders and businesses within the study area.

Appendix A shows definitions of key terms used in this document.

## II. ACCESS TO GEMPO RECORDS AND INFORMATION

The Agency shall make, keep and maintain meeting records; hold meetings open to the public; and file yearly notices of regular Agency meetings with all participating municipalities.

It is GEMPO policy that citizens should have access to sufficient information about any matter to be decided so they can initiate proposals and react knowledgeably to the proposals of others. A cross section of all citizen views shall be encouraged and solicited.

All documents and meeting records should be available to interested citizens. If a member of the public would like to meet at a time outside of GEMPO staff's core hours, staff shall make an appointment with that person at a mutually agreeable date and time.

GEMPO staff shall make available GEMPO meeting minutes upon request.

## III PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS

### A. Meeting Protocol

The Agency will work to keep meetings and public hearings brief, to the point, orderly, and consistent with the established agenda items or hearing materials. GEMPO shall include on all GEMPO Agenda an item for "Citizen Comments and/or Correspondence"

A specific time will be set aside on all meeting and hearing agendas for public involvement. The Chairperson or hearing officer will have the right to set a time limit for public comments.

B. Accessibility - GEMPO staff shall be available to the public Monday through Friday (Public holidays excepted) from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and by appointment, in the Transportation Planning Office located at 1699 Chestnut Street, Gadsden, Alabama. Contact telephone numbers are (256) 549-4519 or (256) 549-4832. Staff shall also be available to make presentations to groups, as requested. During public comment periods, copies of the subject documents will be available in the Transportation Planning office, on the Agency website, at the seven municipal clerks' offices and at the main library branches in the region's seven towns for review. An interpreter for the deaf or for those with limited English proficiency can be made available if requested at least 5 working days prior to the meeting. Where possible, meetings held outside of the regular meeting venue will be held at facilities that are ADA accessible and at times and locations that are accessible via public transportation.

#### IV. NOTICE PROCEDURES

A. Agency Meetings - For the GEMPO Policy and other Committees, regular meeting agenda and meeting notices at which Agency policies and programs are established are mailed or emailed at least 7 calendar days prior to the meeting, to the region's municipal clerks for posting and to Committee Members. Special meeting agendas and notices are mailed or emailed at least 6 calendar days prior to the meeting to Policy Committee members and to the region's municipal clerks for posting. An annual schedule of all regular meetings is sent to all municipal clerks in the region and posted on the GEMPO website. As a general rule GEMPO Policy and Technical Advisory Committees meet on the second Thursday of every other month starting in January. The Citizens Advisory and Bicycle, Pedestrian & Greenways Advisory Committees meet on the first Tuesday of every other month beginning in January.

B. Mailing List - GEMPO shall maintain an MPO mailing list. Notices of GEMPO Policy and Advisory Committee meetings will be sent to those on the MPO mailing list. GEMPO staff will include, to the extent possible, private transportation firms, news media, social service agencies, groups representing minorities, bicycle groups and any citizens wishing to be included.

C. Public Hearings/Public Informational Meetings - Public Hearings will be held prior to the adoption of Long-Range Transportation Plans (LRTPs), Transportation Improvement Plans (TIPs), Public Involvement Plan and Special Studies. When developing a new plan or making a major modification to the an existing regional transportation plan, the GEMPO will consult "as appropriate" with State and local agencies for land use management, natural resources, environmental protection, and historic preservation, with particular but not exclusive emphasis on potential environmental mitigation activities. This consultation will help the GEMPO achieve its related goal of promoting consistency between planned transportation improvements and State and local planned growth and economic development patterns. There shall be a comment period associated with all public hearings. A summary of significant comments and the disposition of the comments shall be provided in the final document. Public involvement requirements for minor amendments and administrative actions applied to the TIP shall be satisfied by the regular notification process described for meetings of the MPO Policy and Advisory Committees. Those minor amendments and actions shall appear individually on the MPO meeting agenda.

D. GEMPO Website - The GEMPO shall maintain a calendar of meetings and activities on its

website. The website will also contain copies of appropriate reports and plans that individuals can read online or download to their own computer. Draft documents will be made available on the GEMPO website in advance of any decision to be made by the GEMPO policy board.

E. Meeting Locations - All meetings will be scheduled at convenient and accessible times and places. Regularly scheduled meetings of the MPO Policy and Advisory Committees are normally held at an accessible and conveniently located facility, usually the offices of the Gadsden Etowah Chamber of Commerce at 1 Commerce Square, Gadsden, Alabama.

Sufficient notice will be provided to the public and interested citizens when occasional modifications to this schedule are necessary. Scheduling of public information meetings held for special planning studies, both time and place, will be determined based on the suggestions of appropriate stakeholders.

F. Visualization - In an effort to better describe each plan or program under consideration by the citizens and interested parties, the GEMPO will employ appropriate visualization techniques. These techniques often include handouts, maps and graphics on presentation boards, and/or electronic presentations (such as Power Point). When available and appropriate, the GEMPO may also use visualization software, transportation models, animation and DVD's.

The following procedure is to be used when planning public hearings for the Policy Board:

**Table 1: Public Hearing Procedures**

Time Frame	Agency/Person Notified	Form of Notification
Minimum 7 days prior to first date of public review period	All City and County clerks' offices	Public notices /agenda and copies of relevant planning documents
Minimum 7 days prior to first date of public review period	Gadsden Times, Messenger & Reporter Newspapers	Public notices for publication
Minimum 7 days prior to first date of public review period	Mayors and Commissioners	Copies of press releases and planning documents
Minimum 5 days prior to first date of public review period	MPO members and web site	Notice and copies of planning documents

A 45-day public review period is required for revisions to the Public Involvement Plan. If the final plan differs significantly from the one that was made available for public comment, an additional opportunity for public comment will be made with one additional public hearing, which will be noticed in the Gadsden Times( daily publication), Messenger(weekly community newspaper) and Reporter ( monthly community newspaper) newspapers. All persons who make comments will be acknowledged via telephone, mail or email.

**Table 2: Document Review Process**

Document	Review Period	Public Meetings
L RTP	30 days	3 meetings as follows: i) During draft process ii) After rough draft iii) Public hearing
Special Studies	30 days	3 meetings as follows: i) During draft process ii) After rough draft iii) Public hearing
TIP	30 days	One public hearing
PIP	45 days	One public hearing

All meeting notices will be sent to municipal clerks, who will be asked to post them for the benefit of the public, and will be posted on the Agency web site. Relevant special interest groups known to the GEMPO will be notified of public hearings and public informational meetings.

On the public information meeting and public hearing dates, directional arrows will be placed on building doors, elevators and hallways. Public Notices, summarizing opportunities for commenting on the draft LRTP or draft major amendment, will include date, time, place, subject and filing of notice with municipal clerks and will note that the plan can be reviewed at the GEMPO and, municipal clerks' offices as well as, and main branch libraries. Notices to clerks will include date, time, place and subject and a request to post and keep planning document on file until date of hearing or end of comment period, whichever, is later. Notices to other local elected officials will include a press release and an offer of copies of the planning documents.

## V. RECEIPT OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Any public comments and responses will be included in the appendices of all documents. GEMPO shall provide a summary of how it responded to significant public comments during the development of a plan or document. This summary may be produced as a separate report or included in the appendices of the planning document. Those who submit written comments will receive responses within 10 working days, provided they provide a mailing address or email address. They will also receive notice of any meetings or hearings associated with completion of the plan in question.

## VI. EXTENSION OF PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

If a final planning document differs significantly from the one that was made available for public comment and/or raises new material issues that interested parties could not reasonably have anticipated, GEMPO will make available an added comment period of at least 30 days. This additional comment period will be advertised just as the original comment period was. Those who made comments—provided they provided contact information—will be personally notified of the additional period.

## VII. SECTION 5307 GRANTS - PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS

The public involvement plan as described herein and as adopted by the GEMPO for its TIP shall also serve to satisfy all of the public involvement requirements, including provision for public notice and time established for public review and comment, of City of Gadsden and other municipalities as applicant for regular Section 5307 (FTA Transit Capital & Operating) and other FTA funded grants.

## VIII. TITLE VI AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The GEMPO will incorporate the tenets of the 1994 Executive Order on Environmental Justice (EO 12898), USDOT Order 5610.2 of April 1997, Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and related guidance from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).

Public Notices regarding regular and special meetings of the GEMPO and its subcommittees shall be provided to stakeholders of particular interest to low income and minority groups. Staff shall create and maintain a database of such stakeholders, which includes but is limited to: transit groups, social service agencies, community-based organizations, media outlets that target minority groups, civic clubs, neighborhood revitalization zones, homeowner associations, and neighborhood organizations. At a minimum, GEMPO shall identify any groups that it needs to involve, add them to the appropriate mailing lists and define methods for engaging them in relevant programs and projects.

Additionally, notice designed to disseminate information to the above-mentioned groups shall be sent to appropriate media. Newsletters and web site postings shall contain advance notice of public hearings, public informational meetings and regular and special meetings of the GEMPO and its subcommittees.

## IX. SCOPE OF OFFICIAL RECORDS

The official records of the GEMPO shall consist of, but not be limited to, all bylaws, minutes, resolutions, contracts, referrals and grant applications. These official records of the GEMPO will be maintained by the Agency and will be available in the office files for public inspection during regular working hours.

## X. MAJOR PLANNING PRODUCTS

A. Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) - The LRTP is produced every five (5) years to satisfy the federal MPO requirement. The LRTP is developed in the following steps:

1. Data collection
2. Public informational/public input meetings
3. Plan creation
4. Public informational period
5. Public Hearings
6. Ratification of the Plan

Public input is first sought at the public information/public input meeting(s). GEMPO hosts multiple meetings designed to inform the public about the LRTP process and to gather public input about the direction the transportation system should take over the period of the LRTP. During the thirty (30) day public informational period, a draft of the LRTP is placed at the Transportation Planning Office, GEMPO web site, City Halls and main libraries of the MPO's participating members.

During this time, the public may comment on the LRTP by writing, faxing, emailing or calling the agency, as well as by coming to the GEMPO Office in person. The final Plan after adoption by the GEMPO Policy Committee will also be posted to the GEMPO website and be available there until an updated or new Plan is adopted.

B. Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) - The TIP is compiled every four (4) years. The TIP lists all federally-funded surface transportation projects scheduled for implementation in the region over this period. The TIP is developed in the following steps:

1. Inclusion of projects from ALDOT
2. Inclusion of local projects
2. Creation of Draft TIP
3. Public informational period
4. Public Hearings
5. Ratification of the TIP

Public input is first sought at the public informational meeting held before the public comment period. During the public informational period, a draft of the TIP is placed at the GEMPO Office and the City Halls and main libraries of the MPO's seven participating governments for a period of thirty (30) days. During this time, the public may comment on the TIP by writing, faxing, emailing or calling the agency as well as by showing up in person. The public is also afforded such opportunity at the public hearings held for the plan. Over the course of its four (4) year planning period, the TIP may require amendments and revisions.

The requirements for revisions shall be satisfied by following the standard procedures for MPO Policy and Advisory Committee meetings. Minutes of the meetings adopting revisions will be posted on the GEMPO website. The requirements for **minor and administrative amendments** shall be satisfied by public notification and posting on the GEMPO website for a minimum of 30 days prior to a decision by the GEMPO Policy Committee. The final amendments will also be posted to the GEMPO website as soon as possible after their adoption. The final TIP will also be posted to the GEMPO website after its adoption, and made available there at least until an updated or new TIP is adopted.

C. Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) - The UPWP is an annually produced description of MPO transportation activities to be undertaken during the current fiscal year. Public involvement is addressed in Task 11, which lists activities related to public involvement for all elements of the planning process. The draft UPWP is available for review and approval by the GEMPO Policy and Advisory Committees prior to submission to ALDOT and FHWA for approval. The final UPWP document is posted on the GEMPO website for the duration of the fiscal year.

D. Annual Listing of Projects - An annual listing of authorized projects, including investments in pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, for which Federal funds have been obligated in the preceding year shall be made available on the GEMPO website. The listing is developed by the ALDOT and will be consistent with categories identified in the TIP.

E. Coordination- All the major MPO planning products will be coordinated with the statewide transportation planning public involvement and consultation process.

## XI. REVIEWING THE PIP FOR EFFECTIVENESS

The United States Department of Transportation recently issued a Title VI Process Review Report, which states that MPOs must “Develop and document a systematic way to review the effectiveness of public outreach efforts and citizen involvement, and include in the next update of the public participation guidelines.” Therefore, GEMPO has created an evaluation process that will help it understand the effectiveness of the PIP. Each planning document GEMPO produces that is subject to the rules of this PIP, will be monitored by staff in terms of attendance and input. When the PIP is reviewed, this data will be used to determine the PIP’s effectiveness and to guide creation of the next PIP. Attendees will be asked to fill out the brief survey about the PIP process.

Additionally, the annual review includes an evaluation of:

- outreach strategies,
- visualization techniques,
- venue accessibility
- MPO distribution list entries
- website design
- disposition of public comments
- grantor and other partner agencies’ input

Table 3: Public Involvement Evaluation Tools

<b>Public Involvement Tool</b>	<b>Evaluation Criteria</b>	<b>Performance Goal(s)</b>	<b>Performance Strategies</b>
<i>Scheduled Meetings</i>	Track attendance of appointed members and alternates	Strive for 100% attendance from committee or least a quorum (50%) for each scheduled meeting	Outline minimum standards for attendance in MPO Bylaws and address issue with appointing officials
	Track attendance of other stakeholders and their participation	Encourage attendance of non appointees. Aim for 3-5% affected population.	Post meeting dates at prominent locations
<i>Printed Materials &amp; Handouts</i>	Guides and Regulatory guidelines/updates distributed	Distribute to new persons in MPO database, contact lists and at community events	Identify interested persons at public or special events
<i>Requests for Information</i>	Number of verbal, phone, written and other requests for information	Respond to general public requests for information	Develop Public Involvement contact logs to document information provided
<i>MPO Website</i>	Keep tally of site visitors	Adopt user friendly and informative website	Increase links to related sites and post press releases
<i>News Releases/Articles</i>	Track news articles and level of press coverage	Strive for increased and diverse press coverage of MPO activities	Maintain positive relationship with media personnel and issue regular press releases
<i>Project Specific Events</i>	Document public attendance & involvement in activities for special projects	Set minimum threshold participation by affected population	Select convenient locations and times for activities

## **Appendix A: Definitions**

**Amendment** – Revision to the LRTP, TIP involving major changes to a project including the addition or deletion of a project or major change in project cost, design concept or scope. This is a revision requiring public review and comment.

**Gadsden Etowah Metropolitan Planning Organization (GEMPO)**–GEMPO is the metropolitan planning agency for the Cities of Attalla, Gadsden, Glencoe, Hokes Bluff, Reece City, Rainbow City and Southside as well as portions of Etowah County within the Study Area boundary.

**Long-Range Transportation Plan**–The Long-Range Transportation Plan is developed every five (5) years. The Plan lays out the region’s desired transportation system and actions over a 25 year time period.

**Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)**–A federally-designated entity that is responsible for conducting regional transportation planning and selecting federally-funded projects in an urban area.

**Public Hearing**–During the planning process, one or two public hearings may be held to allow the public to voice its opinions and concerns about the plan being considered. Public hearings take place near the end of the planning process and testimony is often recorded.

**Public Informational Meeting**–Public informational meetings are held during the planning process. Their purposes are to inform the public about planning activities and to solicit public input. They may be held early or late in the planning process.

**Public Involvement Plan (PIP)**–The PIP is necessary to guide staff in its planning endeavors and to let the public know GEMPO’s strategy for public involvement.

**Revision** – A change to the LRTP or TIP that occurs between scheduled updates. A major revision is an ‘amendment’ while a minor one is an ‘administrative modification.’

**Special Local Studies**–Sometimes GEMPO may obtain funding to conduct transportation studies beyond those required of MPOs. These can include, but are not limited to, bicycle/pedestrian plans, corridor studies and transit studies.

**Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)**–The TIP is the annual programming of all federal transportation funding in the region over a four (4) year period. NO federally funded project can be implemented if the MPO does not incorporate it into the TIP. The TIP can be amended throughout the four year period.

**Update** – Making current an LRTP or TIP through a comprehensive review. Updates require public review and comment and demonstration of fiscal constraint.

**Visualization Techniques** – Methods used in the development of transportation plans and programs with the public, elected officials and stakeholders in a clear and easily accessible format to promote improved understanding of existing or proposed transportation plans and programs.