

Chapter 6: Agency Coordination and Public Involvement

6.0 Agency Coordination and Public Involvement

For the development of US 278 Corridor Improvements project, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) coordinated with the following three distinct groups to ensure meaningful involvement and input: Federal, State and Local agencies; the general public; and identified project stakeholders, including public officials, business owners and other groups with an interest in this project.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations state that agencies must, “make diligent efforts to involve the public in preparing and implementing their NEPA procedures.”

This chapter describes the initial and continuous efforts to engage with these three groups while developing potential alternatives for the proposed project area. Since public and agency involvement are critical components of the transportation planning process, engaging these groups at the very early stages helps ensure decisions are made in consideration of public preferences and to meet public needs. The continued engagement remains critical to the successful identification and design refinement of a recommended preferred alternative.

6.1 Regulatory and Resource Agencies

A Letter of Intent (LOI) was distributed on September 4, 2018 by email to the resource and regulatory agencies to notify them of the initiation of the proposed project. Refer to Appendix A for the LOI and agency responses.

The LOI provided general project information and requested comments on potential environmental issues and concerns within the project study area (PSA).

FHWA and SCDOT are the Joint Lead Agencies and share the responsibility of identifying the status and level of agency involvement during the environmental process. This includes the identification of cooperating and participating Agencies. Refer to Section 1-1, Table 1-1 for a list of cooperating and participating agencies.

The Agency Coordination Plan (ACP) establishes the framework for regular communication among the agencies involved in the environmental review process and ensures an interdisciplinary approach to decision-making. Refer to Appendix A for more detailed information on the ACP.

Effective interagency coordination is the key to achieving environmentally responsible transportation decisions. Coordination occurs at the following major points in which the cooperating and participating agencies are offered the opportunity to comment and provide input:

1. Agency Coordination Plan
2. Purpose and Need Statement
3. Range of Alternatives/Alternatives Carried Forward
4. Preferred Alternative

Agency coordination meetings are organized at key points in the project development process to keep agencies updated and to receive feedback. SCDOT’s Agency Coordination Effort (ACE) meetings are used to present and discuss project issues. Refer to Appendix A for ACE meeting summaries.

The initial ACE meeting was attended on February 14, 2019. The purpose of this meeting was to present the project, the ACP, and to discuss the draft Purpose and Need statement. Following this meeting, FHWA and SCDOT requested coordination. Table 6-1 summarizes the coordination points and dates for the project.

A second ACE meeting was attended on June 13, 2019 to discuss the alternative evaluation criteria and the range of alternatives. This meeting also provided a coordination point for agencies.

On August 8, 2019, a third meeting was attended to present and discuss the full range of preliminary alternatives, the evaluation criteria, and the proposed Reasonable Alternatives. Following this meeting, FHWA and SCDOT requested coordination. Table 6-1 summarizes the coordination points and dates for the project.

The March 12, 2020 ACE meeting was attended to discuss the Reasonable Alternatives and updates made to those alternatives since the August ACE meeting, as well as to discuss preliminary Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) assessment and future mitigation planning.

Additionally, on May 14, 2020, an ACE meeting was organized to discuss impacts associated with each of the Reasonable Alternatives and to present the proposed Recommended Preferred Alternative 4A.

Table 6-1 Coordination Tracking

Agency	Coordination Point	Coordination Date
Federal Agencies		
US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)	Agency Coordination Plan	March 28, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 28, 2019
US Coast Guard (USCG)	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA)	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
Sovereign Nations		
Catawba Indian Nation	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
Eastern Shawnee Tribe	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
Muscogee (Creek) Nation	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019

Table 6-1 Coordination Tracking (continued)

Agency	Coordination Point	Coordination Date
State Agencies		
South Carolina Department of Archives and History (SCDAH)	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
South Carolina Department of Health & Environmental Control (SCDHEC)	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
SCDHEC; Ocean & Coastal Resource Management (SCDHEC OCRM)	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR)	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019
Local Agencies		
Beaufort County	Agency Coordination Plan	March 25, 2019
	Purpose and Need Statement	March 25, 2019

SCDOT and FHWA also organized meetings with USFWS throughout the project to discuss the potential impacts to the Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge (PINWR) and the C.C. Haigh, Jr. Boat Landing. Meetings were held at key points in the project development process to keep USFWS updated and to receive feedback. Refer to Appendix A for meeting summaries from the USFWS coordination meetings.

The boat landing is managed by an agreement with Beaufort County and used by USFWS, Beaufort County residents, local emergency services, as well as individuals from outside the general area, for recreational boating and fishing opportunities.

The first USFWS meeting on March 4, 2019 initiated coordination with USFWS and PINWR.

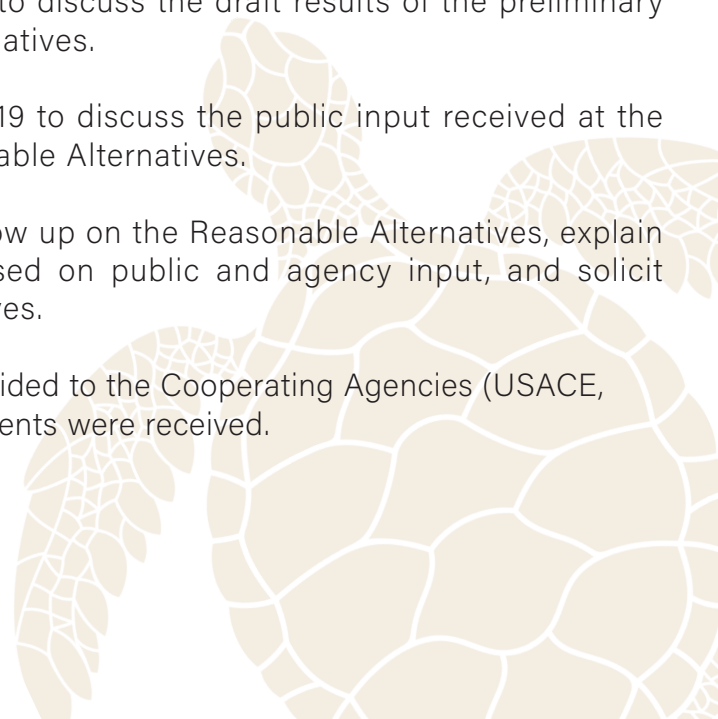
On June 25, 2019, a second meeting with USFWS was organized to discuss the preliminary range of alternatives and the criteria used to evaluate these alternatives.

A third USFWS meeting was attended on July 23, 2019 to discuss the draft results of the preliminary alternative analysis and the proposed Reasonable Alternatives.

A USFWS meeting was also attended on October 9, 2019 to discuss the public input received at the September 19, 2019 PIM and to follow up on the Reasonable Alternatives.

A USFWS meeting was held on January 30, 2020 to follow up on the Reasonable Alternatives, explain the three revisions to the Reasonable Alternatives based on public and agency input, and solicit comments from USFWS on the least impactful alternatives.

A draft version of the Environmental Assessment was provided to the Cooperating Agencies (USACE, USCG, and USFWS) for review on May 13, 2021. No comments were received.



6.2 Public Involvement Goals

The goals of public involvement for this project include:

- To provide transparency during the process through timely and complete information.
- To encourage public engagement throughout the process, including key decision-points where input is needed to identify community transportation needs, concerns, and guide decision-making.

6.3 Outreach Area

The US 278 Corridor Improvements Project public involvement and outreach area boundary includes a 1,000-foot buffer surrounding the US 278 corridor between Moss Creek Drive in Bluffton and Spanish Wells Road in Hilton Head Island. In some areas, the boundary extends beyond the 1,000-foot buffer to include full neighborhoods and adjacent neighborhoods to fully capture potential indirect impacts. Figure 6-1 shows the public involvement outreach area.

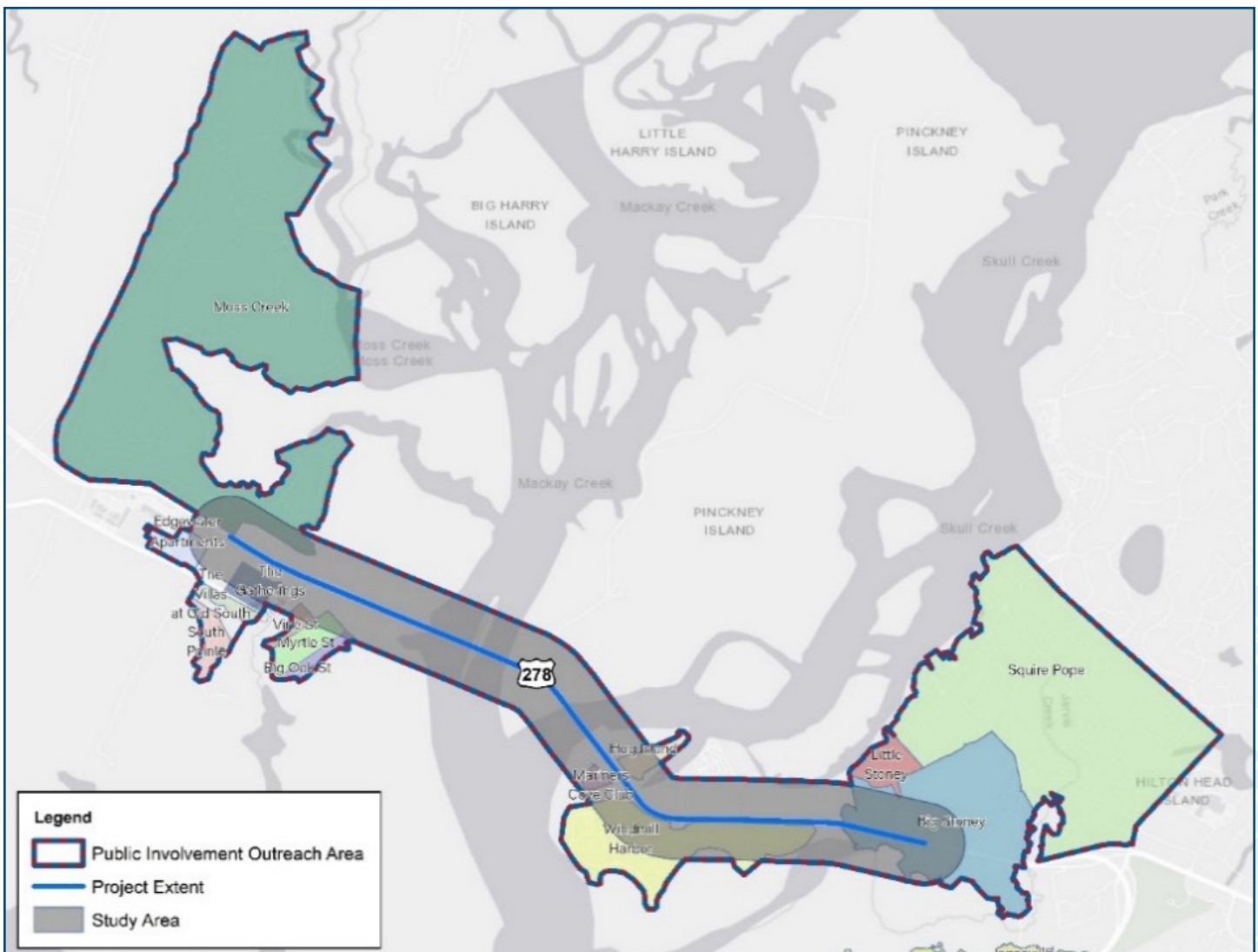


Figure 6-1 US 278 Corridor Improvement Outreach Area

6.4 Public Engagement

NEPA encourages meaningful public involvement in decisions affecting the quality of human and natural environments. An effective public involvement process provides an open exchange of information and ideas between the public and transportation decisionmakers.

6.4.1 Public Information Meetings and Public Hearing

Two public information meetings (September 27, 2018 and September 19, 2019) were held to communicate the project objectives with the public and to gather comments and recommendations about the project, possible impacts, and potential solutions. Refer to Appendix R for meeting plans and summaries from both public information meetings.

6.4.2 Public Information Meeting One (September 27, 2018)

The first public information meeting for the US 278 Corridor Improvements project was held on Thursday, September 27, 2018 from 6-8 p.m. at the Hilton Head Island High School cafeteria. The public comment period closed on October 12, 2018. A total of 203 people attended the first public information meeting. Refer to Figure 6-2 for a summary of the first public information meeting.

Content and engagement activities were designed to inform the public about the process and to receive feedback from the public. Information was made available regarding the NEPA process, project schedule, PSA, traffic analysis, bridge requirements, environmental mapping, community mapping, as well as an overview of the noise analysis. The room was set up with a sign-in table, seven educational stations, and a table for Beaufort County.

A total of 102 comments were received during the comment period. These include:

- 53 written responses at the meeting
- 17 website comments
- 13 mailed responses
- 16 emails (to both the project manager and the project email address)
- Three letters from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Coastal Conservation League, and the Savannah Riverkeeper

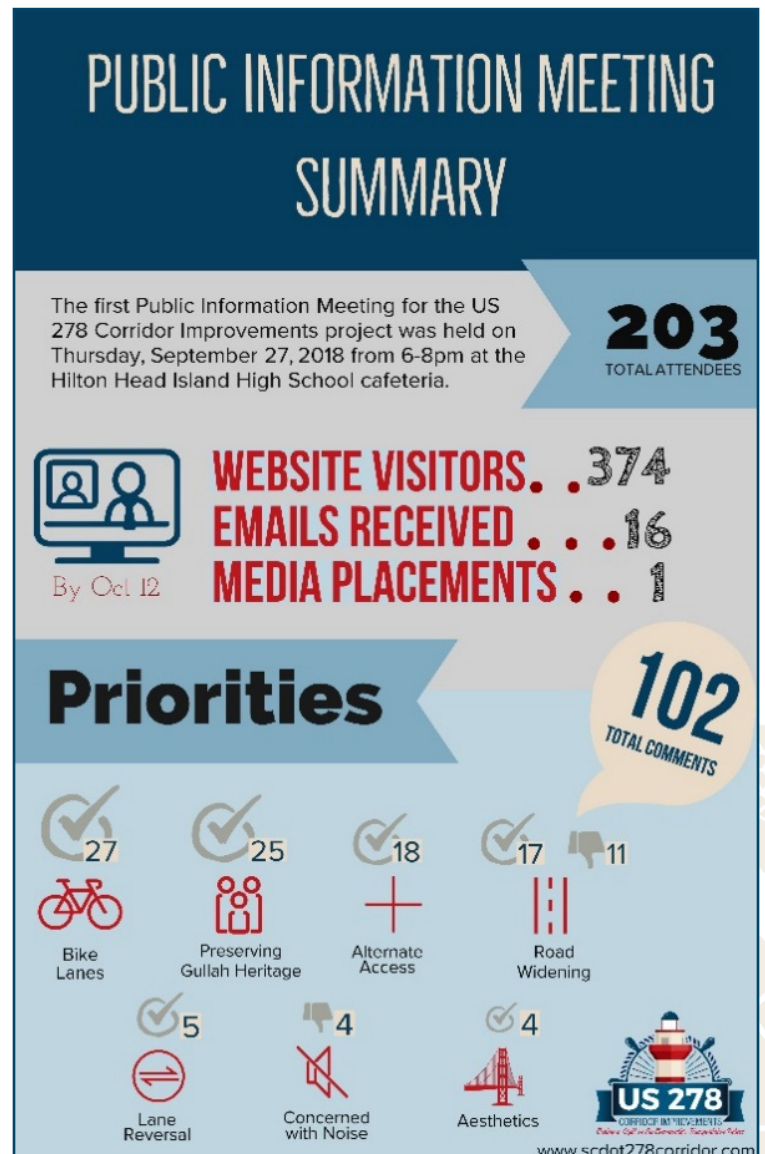


Figure 6-2 Public Information Meeting One Summary Infographic

Key recurring comment themes included support for adding bike and/or pedestrian access to the bridges connecting Hilton Head Island to Bluffton as well as the need to preserve the Gullah Geechee/ Stoney communities. The need for an additional access point to the island, such as a parallel or alternate bridge, was also a major concern.

6.4.3 Public Information Meeting Two (September 19, 2019)

The second public information meeting for the US 278 Corridor Improvements project was held on Thursday, September 19, 2019 from 5-7 p.m. in the gymnasium of the Boys & Girls Club of Hilton Head Island. Identified Project Stakeholders were invited to attend the event early from 4-5 p.m. to get a preview of the materials and information. The public comment period closed on October 25, 2019 (extended from October 18, 2019 at the request of the Town of Hilton Head Island). The general public was invited and encouraged to attend. A total of 330 people attended the second public information meeting. The meeting layout included a sign-in table and eight educational stations. The stations included a Virtual Public Information Meeting Video (VPIM) as well as information on the NEPA process, project schedule, PSA, the Purpose and Need, the range of alternatives and alternatives evaluation criteria, and the proposed Reasonable Alternatives. Information was also available on the ongoing community impact assessment (CIA) and a video about the noise analysis process was presented in a private viewing area.

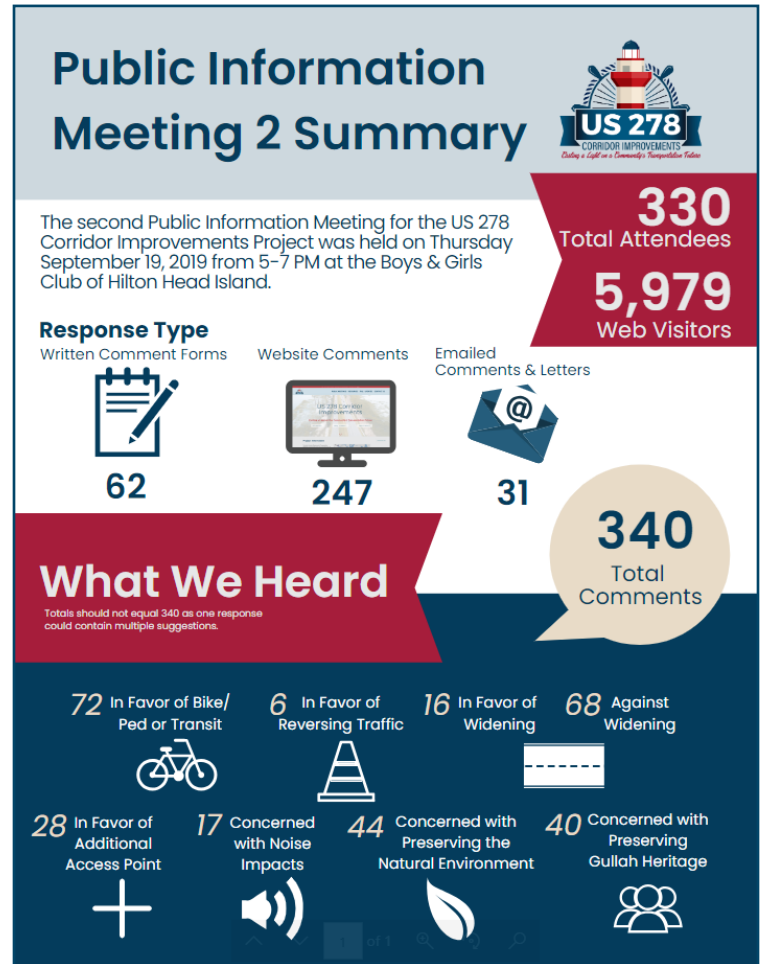


Figure 6-3 Public Information Meeting Two Summary Infographic

A VPIM was also available online throughout the official public comment period. The VPIM is hosted on the project website and consists of a short video highlighting project information. The information available on the VPIM is consistent with the information shared at the in-person public information meeting, providing an alternative for interested parties unable to attend in person. Between September 4 and October 25, 2019, the website had 5,979 visitors, refer to Appendix S. Refer to Figure 6-3 for a summary of the second public information meeting.

A total of 340 comments were received during the comment period which ended on October 25, 2019.

- 43 written responses at the public information meeting
- 247 website comments
- Five mailed comment forms
- 25 emails (to both the project manager and the project email address)
- Six letters
- 14 written responses at the Hilton Head Island Open House held on October 17, 2019.

6.4.4 Future Opportunities for Public Input

A public hearing will be held in conjunction with the identification of the recommended preferred alternative and the publication of the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA). The Draft EA, display boards, and maps of the project area will be available for viewing. The project team will prepare an official court report transcript of the public hearing and public hearing certification.

The public hearing will consist of an open-house format with members of the project team available to meet with the public and discuss details about the project. The open-house portion of the hearing will be followed by a formal presentation with the opportunity for the public to make verbal comments.

The goals of the public hearing are to provide an opportunity for the public to review the preliminary plans for the recommended preferred alternative and discuss the proposed project individually with representatives from SCDOT. The public hearing will also announce the availability of the Draft EA and collect comments and input from the public to progress the project through the Final EA.

6.4.5 Advertisement of Public Information Meetings and Public Hearing

The public is notified about the public information meetings and the public hearing through announcements on the project website, social media, postcards, road signs within the PSA, the project newsletter, flyers, (Palmetto Breeze) bus wraps, and distribution of news releases and/or other materials to the media. Refer to Appendix R for the advertising summary and Appendix T for project newsletters.

6.5 Additional Community Outreach

6.5.1 Special Outreach Areas and Traditionally Underserved Populations

Populations have been identified in the project area that require special outreach to ensure they have access to the project information and the opportunity to make comments, regardless of race, religion, age, income, or disability. Of concern in this project area includes the Gullah Geechee communities, as well as elderly, low-income residents, and local Hispanic communities.

Materials and outreach techniques are tailored to these communities to ensure full and fair participation. Ahead of the second public information meeting, flyers and bulletin inserts were delivered to local churches in the PSA. Additionally, flyers were delivered to libraries and mailed in Public Service District (PSD) water bills and posted to PSD websites and social media in within Hilton Head Island and Beaufort County. Additionally, the project website offers the ability to select a language utilizing the Google translate function and newsletters and public meeting handouts are translated entirely in Spanish.

Special efforts are made to meet with leaders in these communities, visiting churches and social service organizations, to inform, educate, and seek input from residents and businesses.

6.5.2 Community Meetings and Speakers Bureau

Briefings to community and civic groups, business groups, and other interested groups are used to introduce the project, provide project updates, and receive public input. SCDOT is available for community groups/neighborhood meetings throughout the project development process. Refer to Appendix U for a full list of meetings and speaking engagements SCDOT attended.

SCDOT also met with potentially impacted families within the Stoney Community. The first meeting occurred on March 10, 2020 at the Hilton Head Island Branch Library. Subsequent meetings were held on August 20, 2020, September 29, 2020, October 27, 2020, December 7, 2020, and January 26, 2021. The purpose of these meetings was to provide an additional opportunity to discuss the project, the potential impacts of the proposed Reasonable Alternatives, and potential community mitigation ideas with the potentially impacted families. Refer to Appendix U for community meeting and speakers bureau summaries.

6.5.3 Community Events

Community events are an opportunity for SCDOT to engage with the public in a more casual setting. During these events, SCDOT had a booth and materials for the public including contact information, project literature, and maps. Project team members are available to talk with community members and public comments are taken. Refer to Appendix U for community event summaries.

The project team attended two community events during 2019: the 2019 Gullah Festival and the 2019 Bluffton Arts and Seafood Festival.

6.5.4 Small Business Outreach

Small businesses provide a unique point of view that is integral to the project. Small business outreach was conducted in August 2019 and will be conducted again before the public hearing once the preferred alternative is recommended.

During the small business outreach in August 2019, flyers, newsletters, and community impact surveys were taken to approximately 50 businesses within the PSA. Businesses were informed of the project, notified of the upcoming September 19, 2019 public information meeting, and asked if they had questions or concerns. The businesses were encouraged to sign-up for project updates, as well. Refer to Appendix U for a full list of businesses visited through outreach.

The goal of the small business outreach is to distribute important project information, determine the interest in the project, solicit participation in the Stakeholder Group, and invite businesses to attend upcoming meetings.

6.5.5 Stakeholder Engagement

Identified stakeholders include individuals and organizations potentially affected by the project or with a known interest in the project. Project stakeholders include representatives from local public agencies, businesses, residents, nonprofits, and special interest groups in the project area. Stakeholders were invited to participate in the stakeholder group through an official letter. Refer to Appendix V for stakeholder information. The stakeholder group meets quarterly to receive project updates.

Participants are asked to share information or concerns relevant to the project. A moderator captures the comments of the group and presents the findings to the rest of the project team for inclusion in the decision-making process. Stakeholder presentations are posted to the website for the public at large. Refer to Appendix V for a list of the identified stakeholders.

The Town of Hilton Head Island created an independent stakeholder group to represent the distinct interests in the project throughout the Town. The Chairman of this group also participates in the official project stakeholder group. SCDOT is available to make presentations and receive feedback from this group periodically throughout the project development.

6.6 Public Comments

Public and agency comments are an integral part of the project development process. These comments are stored in a comment tracking database and categorized based on topic. Refer to Appendix R for a summary of comments received during the comment period and responses provided to each comment. Comments received through social media were not considered as part of the formal comment process. Online and emailed comments were automatically sent to key members of the project team upon receipt. The project manager responds to most emails within forty-eight hours of receipt. As a rule, all comments that are received during a public comment period receive a formal response. A total of 102 comments were received during the comment period which ended on October 12, 2018. Figure 6-4 is a break down of the general sentiments.

Comments are accepted during the EA process through public meetings, the project website, mail, and email.

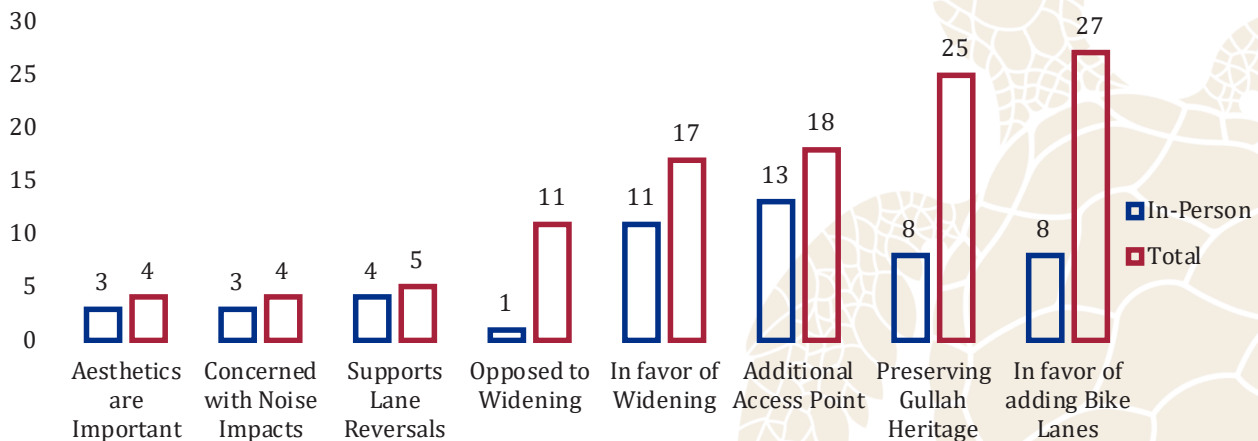


Figure 6-4 Comment Summary