



# REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN

Tennessee Department of Environment and Conversation  
Office of External Affairs

## ABSTRACT

My goal for this research project is to assess the current Public Participation Plan (PPP) from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) and provide recommendations to enhance accessibility and effectiveness in public engagement. In addition to reviewing the PPP, I have interviewed other states, internal employees, and accessibility experts. I have also conducted and analyzed survey data to help inform my recommendations.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b><i>Background Information</i></b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b><i>Initial Research</i></b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b><i>The Public Participation Plan Draft</i></b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b><i>Assessing Engagement</i></b> .....	<b>7</b>
Information Sharing .....	7
Hearings and Meetings .....	9
ADA Compliance and Disability Access .....	10
Language Access: .....	10
<b><i>Interviews</i></b> .....	<b>11</b>
Other States .....	11
Regarding Accessibility .....	15
Internally .....	16
<b><i>Survey Data</i></b> .....	<b>18</b>
Rock Quarry Public Hearing .....	18
General Survey Data .....	19
<b><i>Recommendations</i></b> .....	<b>20</b>
Ideas to Engage the Public in Review of the Plan .....	20
Information Sharing .....	21
Hearings and Meetings .....	23
ADA Compliance and Disability Access .....	24
Language Access .....	24

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC):<sup>1</sup>

“TDEC is organized and administered to effectively protect human health and the environment, conserve natural resources, manage state parks, and promote overall quality of life in Tennessee.”<sup>2</sup>

TDEC’s vision for the future is to “seek to make Tennessee a national model of the environment and conserve critical natural resources for future generations while we make Tennessee an even better place to live, work, play, and raise a family.”<sup>2</sup>



Mission and Guiding Principles:

“TDEC exists to enhance the quality of life of Tennesseans and to steward the natural environment by:

- Protecting and improving the quality of Tennessee’s air, land, and water through a responsible regulatory system
- Protecting and promoting human health and safety
- Conserving and promoting natural, cultural, and historic resources
- Providing a variety of quality outdoor recreation experiences.”<sup>3</sup>

The Office of External Affairs:

“The Office of External Affairs operates within the Division of Stakeholder Engagement and serves as a primary point of contact for external stakeholders with environmental concerns across the state. Regional Directors actively work with local and state officials; business and industry; the general public; community development representatives; and environmental groups. The External Affairs team also serves as key representatives for coordinating and facilitating public meetings, regulatory hearings, information sessions, and community engagement opportunities to ensure the Department is inclusive while meeting its mission.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *LinkedIn, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation.* LinkedIn. (n.d.). <https://www.linkedin.com/company/tennessee-department-of-environment-andconservation/posts/?feedView=all>.

<sup>2</sup> About TDEC. (n.d.). <https://www.tn.gov/environment/about-tdec.html>.

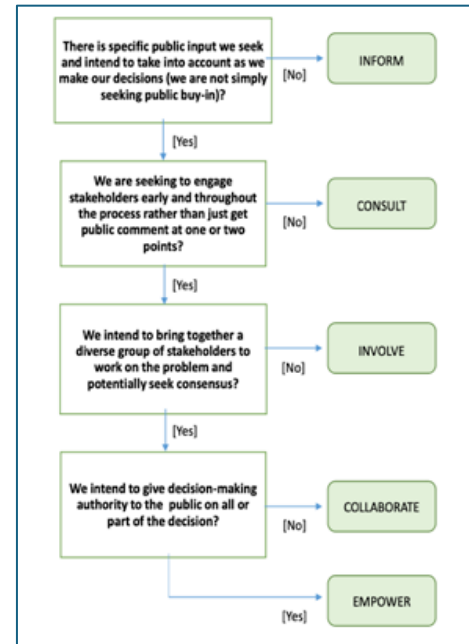
<sup>3</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 2.

<sup>4</sup> External Affairs. (n.d.). <https://www.tn.gov/environment/oea.html>.

## INITIAL RESEARCH

### EPA's Public Participation Process Planning:

A Public Participation Plan (PPP) outlines how community members can engage in planning and development, serving as a framework for sharing tailored information. EPA research shows effective participation relies on careful planning, agency commitment, and organizing for participation, which is essential when seeking public input and clarifying organizational objectives. The EPA states that identifying areas for public input, assessing skills, and gathering resources are crucial steps when crafting a PPP. They assert that understanding stakeholders by conducting situation assessments helps identify who is affected and their concerns, assisting agencies when engaging key stakeholders. The EPA shows that encouraging participation in the decision-making process fosters dialogue and helps clarify decisions, an essential step in the public participation process. The EPA points out that aligning participation tools with objectives at each public participation stage helps maintain clear expectations and effectiveness.<sup>5</sup>



### Crafting an Effective Plan for Public Participation:

An effective PPP fosters meaningful community engagement, serves as a roadmap for including the public in planning processes, and delineates clear procedures for engagement. A plan should effectively communicate what is necessary for successful community involvement. To begin, it is essential to introduce the plan straightforwardly so that everyone understands its purpose. Next, emphasize four fundamental cornerstones: purpose, people, methods, and evaluation. The PPP should clearly define these elements, as they contain critical information for successful public participation. Additionally, it is vital to integrate a public participation strategy into the plan, providing specific instructions on how to engage the public throughout each planning task. The overarching goal is to facilitate meaningful participation that supports the planning process effectively. By doing so, the PPP can cultivate a collaborative environment where the community feels valued and heard.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Environmental Protection Agency. (n.d.). EPA. <https://www.epa.gov/international-cooperation/public-participation-guide-process-planning>.

<sup>6</sup> Crafting an effective plan for public participation. (n.d.). [https://www3.uwsp.edu/cnrap/clue/Documents/publicProcesses/Crafting\\_Effective\\_Plan\\_for\\_Public\\_Participation.pdf](https://www3.uwsp.edu/cnrap/clue/Documents/publicProcesses/Crafting_Effective_Plan_for_Public_Participation.pdf).

## THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN DRAFT

### Introduction:

The plan's introduction gives the background of TDEC and the Public Participation Plan (PPP), stating that the PPP "serves as a blueprint for the engagement of the public in environmental decision-making processes. This plan's guiding principles, best practices, and techniques establish a consistent and comprehensive framework for public engagement, participation, and outreach. The purpose of this policy is to advance TDEC's mission by providing a consistent framework for meaningful public engagement."<sup>7</sup> The goals of the PPP include how TDEC strives to ensure meaningful involvement. The five elements that are identified include "working collaboratively with communities to identify shared goals and opportunities, educate the public on TDEC programs and activities to enhance public awareness, provide consistent communication regarding state law and TDEC's regulatory authority, identify underserved communities to ensure meaningful access, and evaluate engagement strategies to continually improve future public participation."<sup>8</sup>

### ***Goals of the Public Participation Plan:***<sup>9</sup>

<b>Work collaboratively with communities to identify shared goals and opportunities.</b>	TDEC has established partnerships with community organizations, local governments, and non-governmental organizations to foster meaningful dialogue, identify common objectives, and explore opportunities for collaboration.
<b>Educate the public on TDEC programs and activities to enhance public awareness.</b>	TDEC utilizes a variety of methods to educate the public including workshops, webinars, newsletters, meetings, and consultations. These outreach efforts inform the public about TDEC's programs and activities.
<b>Provide consistent communication regarding state law and TDEC's regulatory authority.</b>	TDEC has developed accessible communication channels to keep the public informed, including a website with relevant state laws, regulatory responsibilities, and public participation opportunities.
<b>Identify underserved communities to ensure meaningful access.</b>	TDEC utilizes federal mapping tools to identify disadvantaged communities. A community assessment helps TDEC staff develop customized plans to address the unique cultural, linguistic, and logistical needs of an area.
<b>Evaluate engagement strategies to continually improve future public participation.</b>	TDEC regularly assesses the effectiveness of engagement strategies, seeks feedback, and implements improvements to enhance the quality and impact of public participation efforts.

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<sup>7</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 5.

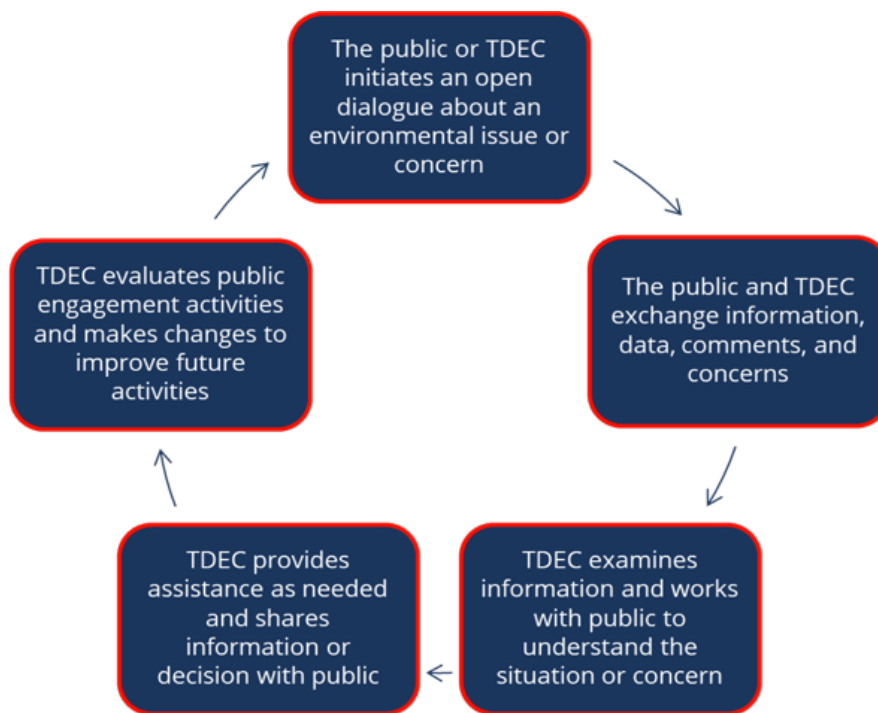
<sup>9</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs. "Goals of the Public Participation Plan." *Public Participation Plan* (2024) [Unpublished], pg.5.

## Public Engagement and Guiding Principles:

TDEC views public engagement as a “broad and inclusive concept that involves interaction and communication between TDEC and the public. It goes beyond the specific art of participation in decision-making and includes activities that promote dialogue, build relationships, and foster collaboration.”<sup>10</sup> This section states that the Office of External Affairs serves as the primary contact point for stakeholders and works with communities to partner together, and after initial contact, TDEC and the public will exchange information.<sup>10</sup> The plan emphasizes open dialogue to foster information exchange, highlighting its crucial strength of creating a collaborative environment leading to better mutual understanding and effective problem-solving.

TDEC’s mission, as detailed above and in the PPP, aligns with the goals laid out in the Public Participation Plan draft. The Public Engagement Flow chart illustrates how exchanging ideas and dialogue is integral to engagement, reflecting TDEC’s commitment to fostering collaboration and maintaining high standards across its regulatory and support functions. This strongly connects TDEC’s mission, public participation, and engagement approach.

***Public Engagement Flow Chart:*** <sup>11</sup>



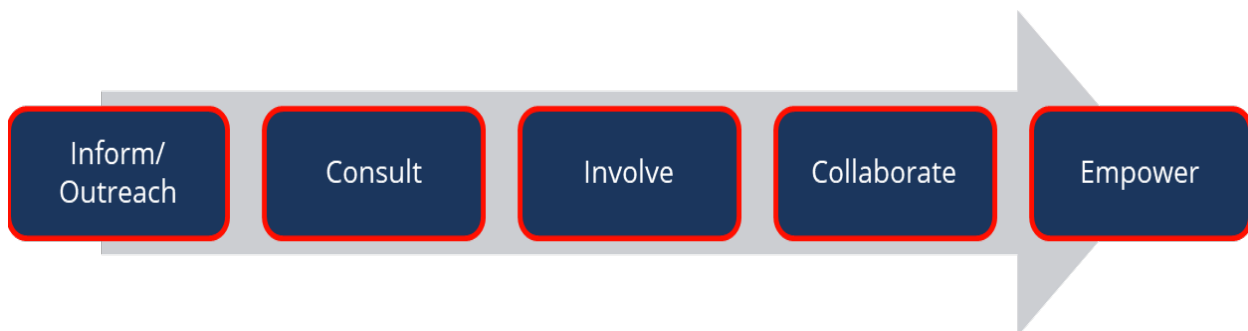
<sup>10</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs. “Public Engagement Flowchart.” *Public Participation Plan* (2024) [Unpublished], pg. 7.

## Public Participation:

TDEC defines public participation as the “involvement of the public in TDEC’s decision-making processes. Unlike public engagement, which is a broad concept and focuses on creating opportunities for dialogue, public participation is a term that focuses on actively involving members of the public by giving them a voice and influence on the outcome or action being considered.”<sup>12</sup> The PPP states that “TDEC aims to work collaboratively with communities, providing timely and accurate information to the public to educate and inform about programs and activities.”<sup>12</sup> The Public Participation Scale is notable, encompassing the stages of informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and empowering. TDEC’s approach to meaningful public involvement is outlined around three steps: “identifying the legal requirements associated with the action, using TDEC’s Public Participation Scale to align the appropriate level of participation with the regulatory requirement and/or desired outcome, and applying suitable tools and best practices.”<sup>13</sup> TDEC uses this approach to ensure that participation is “meaningful, inclusive, and aligned with the legal requirements the community needs.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***Public Participation Scale:***<sup>15</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs. “TDEC’s Public Participation Scale.” *Public Participation Plan* (2024) [Unpublished], pg. 10.

## ASSESSING ENGAGEMENT

I have examined TDEC's current public participation and engagement methods as outlined in the PPP and other sources. I've explored how TDEC shares information through its website, email, newspaper, signage, and social media. I have evaluated how TDEC operates hearings and meetings, along with addressing ADA compliance and language access.

## INFORMATION SHARING

### Website:

The website is easily accessible, with distinct sections that effectively provide various types of information. The Public Participation Features tab includes a calendar of events, public participation opportunities page, FAQ document, and contact information. The calendar provides clear and detailed information on public meetings, board meetings, and hearings. Each event listed on the calendar offers comprehensive details, including date, time, location, contact information, and multiple participation options.



16

Public notices are categorized by division, and all details are provided when chosen. The FAQ section is informative, clearly explaining public hearings and other processes. The contact information page helps provide essential contact information, and Ronne Adkins' email availability for additional questions enhances transparency.

### Email Notification System:

Currently, public notices are sent via email to individuals who have requested to be added to TDEC's email list. The email notification system could be improved to reach a wider audience and expand content.



<sup>16</sup> *Waste notices & hearings*. Tennessee State Government - TN.gov. (n.d.-b). <https://www.tn.gov/environment/ppo-public-participation/ppo-public-participation/ppo-waste.html>.



## Newspaper:

TDEC complies with legal requirements by publishing newspaper notices and posting signs at proposed activity locations. While newspaper notices fulfill legal requirements, their high cost and potentially limited reach could make them less effective compared to other methods, which is addressed in the PPP.<sup>17</sup>

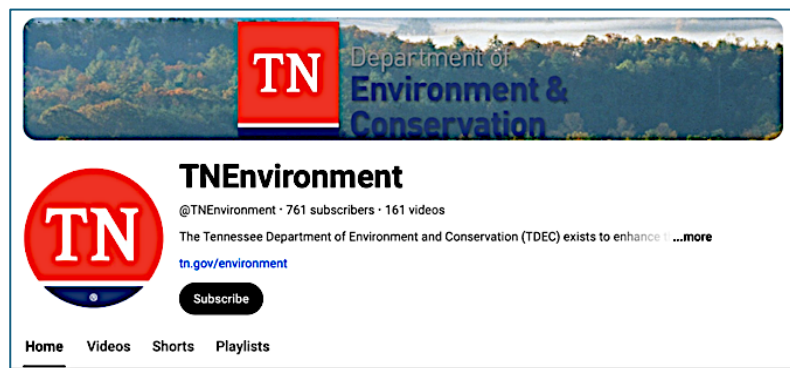
## Signage:

Currently, signage is an affordable and effective method for notifying local communities about proposed activities. Signs are typically placed where they are evident, often on roadsides, and must comply with factors such as proximity to the proposed activity, visibility to the public, and public safety and adherence to laws, including local ordinances and Tennessee Department of Transportation rules.

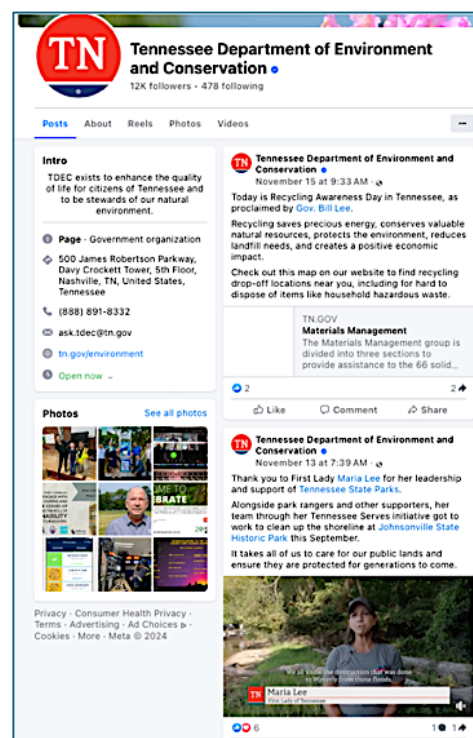
## Social Media:

When reviewing TDEC's social media, I found the LinkedIn profile impressive, with regular posts every few days. The YouTube channel seemed to be performing well, showing consistent activity. The Facebook page had a solid following of 12,000 and maintained an active posting schedule. In the future, TDEC could consider adding an Instagram account to better engage with a younger audience.

18



19



<sup>17</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Facebook *TN Environment*. Facebook. (n.d.). <https://www.facebook.com/TNEEnvironment/>.

<sup>19</sup> YouTube. (n.d.-a). *TN Environment*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/user/tnenvironment>.

## HEARINGS AND MEETINGS

### Public Hearings:

The PPP states the purpose of a TDEC public or rulemaking hearing is “to allow the public to provide comments, on the record, about a proposed permit or rule.”<sup>20</sup> TDEC may schedule the hearing as part of the original public notice if there is significant community interest. “If a hearing is not initially set, the public notice will include instructions for how the public can request a hearing. TDEC works to schedule public hearings at convenient times and locations for the interested public, working with local elected officials and community leaders as needed.”<sup>21</sup> “As part of the rulemaking process, TDEC is required by law in most situations to hold a rulemaking hearing to amend, change, or propose a new rule. Rulemaking hearings provide the public with an opportunity to formally comment on a proposed rule. These hearings are governed by Tennessee’s Uniform Administrative Procedures Act rather than division-specific statutes or rules.”<sup>21</sup>

### Informal Meetings:

“Informal meetings are a less formal avenue for TDEC to collaborate with stakeholders than hearings. These informal meetings can range from small private meetings to larger public meetings. These meetings allow advocates to share their preliminary concerns, allow TDEC to answer questions, and help identify potential information gaps.”<sup>22</sup> “TDEC typically offers an informal public meeting immediately prior to the formal public hearings to ensure that useful information is shared and that the public has an opportunity to speak and interact with TDEC staff informally. The meeting typically involves a presentation of the proposed action and a question-and-answer session.”<sup>21</sup>

### Public Notices:

“Issuing a public notice informs the public about an upcoming opportunity to take part in the decision-making process. Public notices typically include a project description, an explanation of the proposed action, instructions for commenting, instructions for how to find additional information, contact information for division technical staff, and other relevant information. The public notice is posted on TDEC’s website and emailed to a list of people who have requested to be notified.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 11.

## ADA COMPLIANCE AND DISABILITY ACCESS

To ensure hearings and meetings are accessible, “TDEC ensures that all hearings and meetings are held in venues that meet the ADA accessibility standards and allow for meaningful participation by individuals with LEP.”<sup>24</sup> To help overcome barriers to participation like transportation, TDEC utilizes “technology to provide hybrid in-person and virtual participation opportunities allowing TDEC to reach a wider audience and increase accessibility to members of the public.”<sup>25</sup>

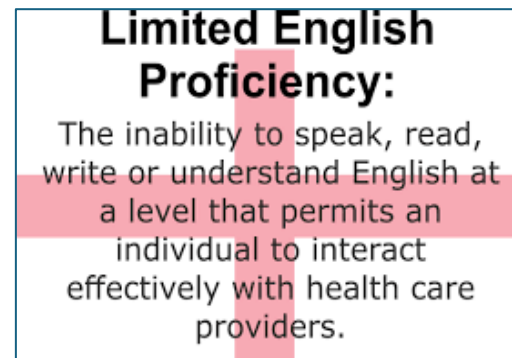
TDEC is committed to “providing persons with disabilities equal opportunity to participate in or benefit from its programs, services, and activities through compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA of 1990...”<sup>25</sup> A Disability Access Plan is in place, detailing efforts to meet disability law requirements, including reasonable modifications for accessibility. TDEC provides full access to its programs, services, and activities, including necessary accommodations and auxiliary aids.



26

## LANGUAGE ACCESS:

TDEC ensures that people of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) have equal access, offering services to participate in programs and activities. This includes translating written documents and providing interpreters. “TDEC’s LEP services extend to public participation opportunities, and reasonable steps will be taken to ensure people of LEP can participate in TDEC’s decision-making process. TDEC’s Language Access Plan details LEP considerations, services, and best practices.”<sup>25</sup> Additionally, TDEC’s website has Google Translate, which converts to over 120 languages.



27

<sup>24</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Office of External Affairs (2024). *Public Participation Plan* [Unpublished], pg. 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ada Accessibility*. City of Lakeland. (n.d.). <https://www.lakelandgov.net/departments/public-works/ada-accessibility/>.

<sup>27</sup> *Limited English proficiency in the ed*. RCEMLearning. (2024, April 3). <https://www.rcemlearning.co.uk/foamed/limited-english-proficiency-in-the-ed/>.

## INTERVIEWS

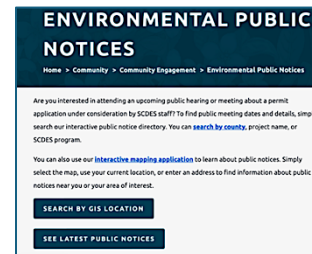
I have interviewed stakeholders and organizations researching public participation, information sharing, accessibility, and related topics. These include discussions with agencies from other states, such as the South Carolina Department of Environmental Services, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management. To gain deeper insights into accessibility, I interviewed Ray Bloomer, an expert in accessibility and disability rights activist. Additionally, to understand the internal operations at TDEC, I spoke with four employees within the department.

## OTHER STATES

### South Carolina Department of Environmental Services:



The South Carolina Department of Environmental Services website provides an intuitive way to search for public notices, allowing users to filter by GIS location or view the latest notices. A standout feature is their interactive mapping application, which makes it easy to search for information by county, enhancing user experience and accessibility.



29

In my interview with the public participation coordinator, Donna Moyer, I learned how the department approaches public participation and engagement, particularly public hearings, meetings, and follow-up. She emphasized the importance of making information accessible, transparent, and easy for the public to understand. She also highlighted several strategies to improve community outreach and public involvement in decision-making.

Regarding public notices, Moyer stated that they found traditional newspaper notices less effective than other communication methods. Therefore, they use various methods to spread the word about public meetings and notices. They engage in extensive outreach through community organizations, such as churches, HOAs, and local leaders. They have also used direct mailouts and postcards with concise bullet points that capture vital information.

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<sup>28</sup> *A new era in environmental protection.* Home | South Carolina Department of Environmental Services. (n.d.). <https://des.sc.gov/>.

<sup>29</sup> *SC Department of Environmental Services: Columbia SC.* Facebook. (n.d.). <https://www.facebook.com/SouthCarolinaDES/>.

Regarding public hearings, Moyer emphasized that before scheduling formal public hearings, the department holds informal meetings to educate the community and address concerns. These meetings help prevent misunderstandings and provide a platform for citizens to ask questions. Moyer stated that early planning and engagement are key to ensuring these meetings are productive and the community feels heard. In addition, the department has created dedicated web pages for public notices and relevant information, particularly for high-interest topics. These web pages provide transparency by offering detailed information about permits, company activities, and decision-making processes, ensuring citizens are well-informed and can access supporting documents.

Moyer also emphasized the importance of relationships and pointed out that community leaders are crucial for maintaining relationships with citizens, and the department tries to stay in contact with these leaders. Maintaining ongoing, positive relationships with communities is important for fostering long-term collaboration. Moyer also suggested sending personal thank-you notes after meetings to help reinforce the department's commitment to community engagement and show appreciation for public input. She also indicated that surveys should be conducted after meetings rather than during to allow participants to reflect on the information presented and provide more thoughtful feedback.

When asked about events to review the draft of the PPP, she spoke about how their organization has hosted events to review drafts and gather feedback from citizens during the early stages of many projects. Roundtable discussions allowed their department to prioritize and organize citizen input, ensure consistency across programs, and help the public see the department as a cohesive agency rather than just an isolated program. Discussing documents like the PPP and citizens guide, Moyer stated that providing accessible, clear guides for public participation in the engagement process would be highly beneficial. She also recommended that as the department implement new policies and documents to ensure staff are engaged and informed. Moyer has found that regular training sessions are necessary to ensure staff are on the same page and to foster collaboration across teams.

## Ohio Environmental Protection Agency:



The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency website features a front page highlighting upcoming events, including news and public hearings, and options to contact authorities or submit emergency complaints. A dedicated events page offers an easy-to-use dropdown menu for searching by keyword, date, or topic, which includes public hearings. Additionally, a "subscribe for updates" option allows users to receive notifications via email or text, effectively enhancing public engagement.

30

In my interview with Cathryn Allen and Mary McCarron from Ohio's Environmental Protection Agency, I gained valuable insights into their current practices regarding website feedback, email subscription effectiveness, and strategies for public participation. They mentioned that while they don't solicit feedback regarding their website, they do offer a contact form and conduct surveys during website overhauls. Additionally, they provide instructions to help users navigate the website easier. For managing email subscriptions, they utilize GovDelivery, which allows them to track key metrics such as delivery, open, and click rates, ensuring they can monitor subscriber engagement effectively.

To encourage attendance at public hearings, they employ targeted outreach to county-specific lists and focus on building relationships with community leaders to foster trust. They acknowledged a decrease in in-person attendance but noted increased participation in virtual hearings facilitated by streamlined notices through GovDelivery. They plan to launch a new app called "Smart Comment" to enhance public input on projects. They also see the potential of public participation in program events to strengthen community relationships. They recommend using these events to assess the website's accessibility by observing real users navigating certain pages.

A screenshot of the "Email Updates" form on the Ohio EPA website. The form has the agency's logo at the top. Below the title, it says "To sign up for updates or to access your subscriber preferences, please enter your contact information below." There is a "Subscription Type" dropdown menu with "Email" selected. Below that is an "Email Address" field with a red asterisk indicating it is required. At the bottom are "Submit" and "Cancel" buttons.

31

A screenshot of the "Events" page on the Ohio EPA website. It features a search bar with the placeholder "Type a Keyword Here". Below the search bar are filters for "Filter by Topic" (with a dropdown showing "ALL TOPICS"), "From Date" (with a date picker), and "To Date" (with a date picker). There are "FILTER" and "RESET FILTERS" buttons. Below the filters is a grid of event cards. Each card shows a date in a blue box, the event title, and the time and format (e.g., "Public Hearing - Virtual, Public Hearing - In Person").

<sup>30</sup> *Email updates*. Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. (n.d.). <https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/OHEPA/subscriber/new>.

<sup>31</sup> Environmental Protection Agency. (n.d.-b). *Ohio Environmental Protection Agency*. EPA. <https://www.epa.ohio.gov/home>.

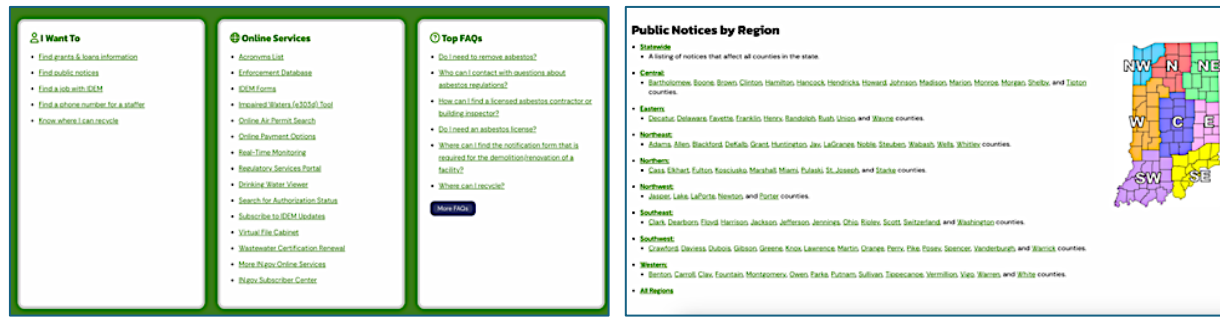


## Indiana Department of Environmental Management: <sup>32</sup>



From my interview with Kevin Bump, the agency web manager at the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM), I gained valuable insights into the agency's communication strategies and digital services. Bump highlighted the effectiveness of the regional map and public notices, noting they are tailored to each region's unique environmental concerns and

interests, organizing notices by region featured on the map for more straightforward navigation. Bump shared that this localized approach helps prevent overwhelming the public with information.



Bump also discussed the agency's dedicated online services section, organized by categories to enhance user experience. He explained that the frequently asked questions (FAQs) on the website are curated using a service from Tyler Technologies, ensuring that the most relevant questions are addressed. The agency employs GovDelivery to manage communications, enabling them to streamline updates and engage users effectively. The agency utilizes a dedicated complaint and feedback line alongside Google Analytics to gather feedback on the website, which provides insights into user behavior. Bump stated that accessibility is a priority, with measures in place to support users with disabilities, overseen by internal staff and external consultants like Site Improve.

When discussing the idea of implementing a citizen's guide, Bump described the guide as a crucial resource for educating the public about the agency's functions and limitations. This one-stop-shop approach aims to enhance understanding and engagement with the agency's work, reinforcing the importance of transparency in government operations.

<sup>32</sup> Idem. (2024, June 3). *Home*. IDEM. <https://www.in.gov/idem/>.

## REGARDING ACCESSIBILITY

### Ray Bloomer:<sup>33</sup>



Ray Bloomer, an accessibility expert, disability rights activist, and NPS leader who has led service-wide training for interpretive rangers from all over the country representing the NPS at national meetings about accessibility, spoke with me, sharing important insights regarding accessibility, especially when creating documents like a PPP. He pointed out that understanding the needs of people with disabilities is crucial for making sure everyone feels included. He also emphasized the importance of working with advisory groups, which provide helpful feedback and training opportunities through organizations like the National Center for Accessibility. Bloomer stressed that accessibility goes beyond just physical features like ramps and grab bars and that it's important to consider how different programs and experiences can benefit individuals with disabilities. This broader view is essential for improving public participation and ensuring everyone can access public programs.

When discussing ways to enhance participation in public hearings for individuals with disabilities, he highlighted the need for accessible meeting locations. This includes providing documents in formats that people who are blind can use, offering tactile maps, and having a list of available assistive devices and interpreters at events. He also talked about effective methods for sharing information. Bloomer encouraged TDEC to use different ways to communicate so that individuals with disabilities have equal access to important information. This approach can help break down barriers and encourage more people to participate in public processes.

With his experience in leading training on accessibility, Bloomer recommended several types of workshops for TDEC staff. He suggested general training that covers physical access and awareness and focused sessions on specific topics, like making interpretive programs and maps accessible. This targeted training can help staff better support the community's needs. Bloomer stressed the importance of using the statewide advisory group to gather feedback from individuals with disabilities, helping to represent more people. He also encouraged staff to talk directly with people who have disabilities to understand their needs better and create a more inclusive environment. Finally, as TDEC develops its PPP, Bloomer suggests informing the public about changes made in response to their feedback. TDEC can strengthen its relationship with the community and encourage ongoing participation by showing that community input leads to fundamental changes.

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<sup>33</sup> Chen, E. (2022, September 23). *What national parks can do to make the outdoors more accessible to people with disabilities*. USA Today. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/experience/national-parks/2022/09/22/national-parks-disability-access/8070293001/?gnt-cfr=1&gca-cat=p>.



## INTERNALLY

I asked four internal TDEC employees a series of five questions. I asked them to describe their position at TDEC and their specific public participation responsibilities. I inquired about the barriers and challenges they have encountered regarding public participation events, specifically how these challenges evolved and how they were overcome. I also asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the current participation process and the barriers to accessing information or services.

### **Kayse Smith:**

Kayse Smith is an Environmental Scientist 2 in the Hazardous Waste Program, focusing on public participation by posting notices, creating hyperlinks to documents, and managing public hearing information. The key challenges she identified include scheduling multiple public hearings in a short timeframe, which complicates logistics and preparation. The transition to hybrid hearings during COVID-19 introduced new requirements, such as setting up virtual meeting platforms and including access information in notices. Smith emphasizes the importance of organization and early preparation to manage the complexities involved in the public participation process. Kayse stated the current public participation process is praised for its accessibility and flexibility, allowing wider audience engagement through both in-person and virtual options. She asserted that the use of digital media has improved information distribution, encouraging community involvement, but noted weakness in the lack of consistent information across divisions about signing up for public notice notifications and suggested that a centralized webpage detailing how to subscribe to mailing lists for different divisions could enhance outreach. Smith experienced difficulties due to the absence of the public participation toolkit and guidance documents, believing that a centralized resource for public participation materials would benefit both new and current employees.

### **Morgan Beck:**

Morgan is an Environmental Scientist 2 in Hazardous Waste Permitting, overseeing permit applications and serving as the Public Participation Officer, which involves organizing public meetings and ensuring community engagement. She faces the challenge of managing multiple public notices simultaneously while also learning the details of the public participation process. To manage these challenges, Morgan created guidelines and collaborated with permit writers to streamline the process, enhancing efficiency. With practice and support from previous role holders, Morgan has built confidence and established strong working relationships to navigate her responsibilities. She stated that the strength of the public participation process lies in the relationships built within TDEC, other agencies, and the public, facilitating broader engagement and addressing community concerns. She has not encountered significant barriers but experienced some confusion during training regarding document access.

**Haley Mills:**

Haley is an Administrative Services Assistant 2, supporting divisions like Facilities and Groundwater. In the Office of External Affairs, she prepares materials for public hearings, takes notes in meetings, and manages sign-in and the online chat during events. A key challenge she identified was managing a public meeting invitation that unintentionally went out to a larger audience than intended, leading to over 60 attendees. Haley also reported that the public website requires updates to enhance user experience and provide clearer information. Although the challenges have remained the same, she has become more familiar with her contacts and resources, working to stay organized and seek assistance from colleagues to ensure that all necessary documents are prepared for public events. She appreciates the team's openness to feedback, which helps improve processes and makes the community feel heard.

**Breanna Couey:**

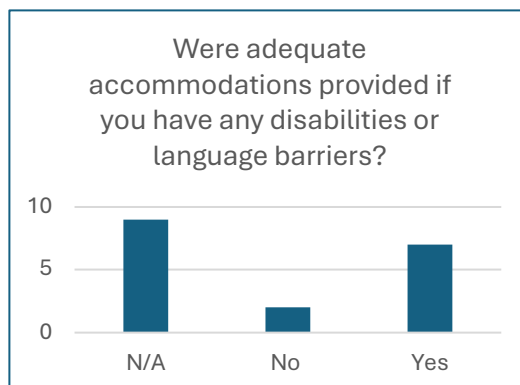
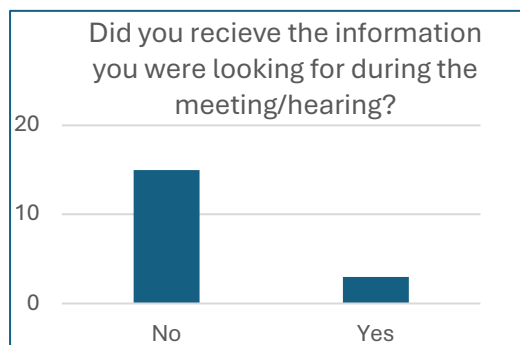
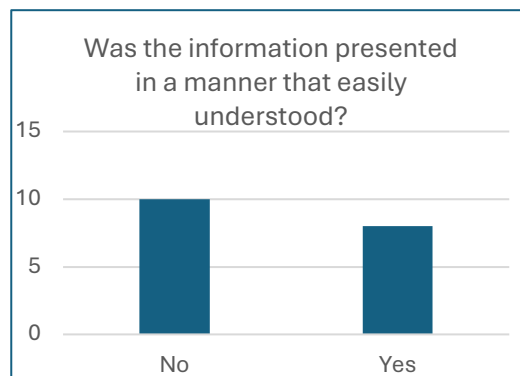
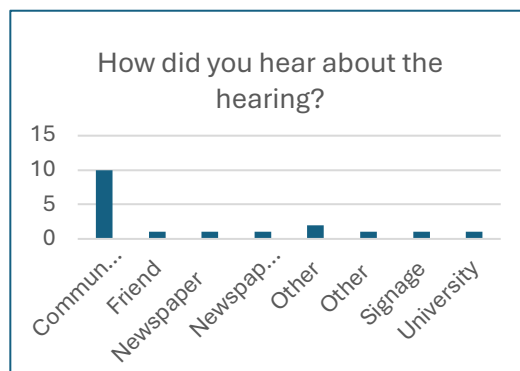
Breanna is an Administrative Services Assistant 4 in the Division of Solid Waste Management. Her public participation duties include sending permitting notices to elected officials and the public, as well as planning public hearings and creating related web content. She has faced challenges with inconsistent communication among permit writers, program managers, and facility contacts, which has affected her ability to perform her duties efficiently, stating that each interaction varies depending on the facility and permit writer involved, leading to inconsistencies. Breanna communicated these challenges to leadership and now focuses solely on public participation in the Solid Waste Program while colleagues handle the Hazardous Waste Program. Breanna suggests that a more consistent internal process and short training for all participants in public participation would enhance understanding of the process's needs and expectations. She notes that the organization and presentation of information on the TDEC website could improve but appreciates that efforts are underway to address this.

## SURVEY DATA

### ROCK QUARRY PUBLIC HEARING

A survey was handed out at a rock quarry public hearing with five questions. The first question had three parts: how attendees heard about the hearing, a request for specifics, and suggestions for future media use. The following three were yes or no questions. It was asked if participants received the information they were looking for, if the information was presented in an easy-to-understand way, and if adequate accommodations were provided for those with disabilities or language barriers. The last question was open-ended, asking for suggestions to improve future public meetings and hearings. About 70 people attended the hearing, and 18 survey responses were recorded.

When asked how people heard about the hearing, 55% of respondents said they learned about it through a community group, while 22% mentioned seeing signage near their homes. For suggested media, only seven people responded; three suggested the newspaper, two preferred Facebook, one mentioned Instagram and email, and another suggested text message updates. Regarding whether attendees received the information they were looking for, 83% said no, and when asked if the information was presented clearly, 55% responded no as well. About accommodations, 50% of respondents selected "not applicable," 38% said yes, and 11% said no. This feedback highlights several areas for improvement in future public meetings. In the free-response section, the common themes were the need for better communication, improved meeting logistics, and better collaboration among agencies.



## GENERAL SURVEY DATA

A comprehensive survey of 25 questions was emailed to individuals who have attended a public hearing in the past year. The goal was to gather insights about citizen preferences and experiences with TDEC's public engagement and participation efforts. When asked how people prefer to receive information, all respondents indicated that email was their preferred method of communication. Many also expressed interest in getting updates through the TDEC website, public meetings, and events. Regarding email subscription and sign-up, only 40% of respondents were subscribed to TDEC's email list, and 40% expressed interest in receiving regular updates about TDEC activities, state issues, or community events. Most pointed to the TDEC website, events, and social media when asked where people would prefer to sign up for email updates.

Regarding social media, 80% of respondents indicated they do not engage with TDEC's social media platforms. Additionally, 100% stated that they would not engage more even if TDEC had an Instagram account. However, it's important to note that responses might differ if a younger demographic were surveyed, as younger people tend to be more active on social media. When asked about the viability of using the newspaper to reach people, none of the survey participants noticed public notices in the local newspaper. When asked about the website, all respondents had accessed the TDEC website at least once, but only 40% found it easy to navigate and transparent.

Only 40% of respondents were satisfied with their experience with public hearings and felt their questions were adequately addressed. 60% expressed concerns about perceived biases in permit requests and the lack of meaningful follow-up after meetings. Many respondents felt that public hearings were often treated as a formality rather than an opportunity for genuine community input, suggesting the need for more transparency and a greater commitment to addressing public concerns.

When asked about attending a session to provide feedback on TDEC's public participation plan, only 40% of respondents showed interest. This may indicate a need for further outreach and engagement to generate more interest in such events. Regarding accessibility, all respondents felt that TDEC facilities and meeting spaces were accessible, and 60% reported no barriers to accessing TDEC information or services. However, there was uncertainty regarding language access, with all participants doubting whether TDEC provides adequate options for non-English speakers, suggesting a need for broader input in language accessibility to ensure more inclusive participation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Here, I will outline my recommendations for how TDEC should move forward based on a comprehensive analysis of data, interviews, surveys, and other findings. My approach draws on my initial review of the Public Participation Plan draft, interviews with other states, accessibility insights from my conversation with Ray Bloomer, feedback from internal employees, critical themes from survey responses, and additional research conducted expanding on these areas.

## IDEAS TO ENGAGE THE PUBLIC IN REVIEW OF THE PLAN

I suggest hosting a series of in-person and virtual working sessions focused on reviewing and providing feedback on the PPP. This approach can help spread awareness and involve more people in the process. Tucson, Arizona, has implemented similar strategies, which could serve as a model. Consider collaborating with the University of Tennessee student organizations and programs. Collaborating with the Baker School Student Association or the Baker Graduate Student Association to host an event could involve working sessions where students and faculty provide feedback on the PPP. Engaging in this way could bring fresh perspectives and connect with a diverse demographic.

When discussing this idea with other states, positive feedback was given, and some discussed hosting similar roundtable discussions to gather public input, allowing citizens to engage with document drafts. I recommend holding focus group gatherings where specific segments of the draft are discussed, and experts can provide detailed feedback on the plan involving local leaders, environmental or community groups, and activists. To make this more accessible, I suggest creating an online platform where citizens can review and comment on draft plans. This platform could be integrated into the website, allowing users to easily navigate and read the draft while providing a simple way to submit questions and offer feedback.



<sup>34</sup> *Participate in working sessions, community forums and share your feedback on the plan Tucson 2025 draft.* City of Tucson. (n.d.). <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/AZTUCSON/bulletins/3b4f3f1>.

## INFORMATION SHARING

### Website:

While I found the website generally easy to navigate, and internal employees noted ongoing efforts to improve its organization, only 40% of survey respondents felt the same way. To address this, I recommend conducting a thorough usability audit focusing on navigation and transparency. The Ohio EPA supported this approach and recommended user testing during public participation programs.

Additionally, I suggest highlighting events more prominently on the homepage, making key actions easier to access, and organizing FAQs and services to simplify navigation. The IDEM recommended expanding the interactive map features for public notices and tailoring content to be more region-specific. Internal employees also acknowledged the need for better organization and presentation of information. Regarding the permitting section of the website, many general survey respondents felt the section should be made significantly more accessible and easier to understand.

### Public Notices:

35

I recommend mirroring the South Carolina Department of Environmental Services in creating a webpage for each public notice, especially for controversial topics. These pages provide a summary of the issue, background information, and details about the upcoming meeting. The page also links to relevant reports, permits, company activities, and policy drafts. This approach allows the public to review all the information before the meeting, helping them be more informed and involved in the decision-making process.

**Adrian Sand/Clay Mine - Horry County**

Adrian Sand LLC has applied for environmental permits from the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) to mine sand and clay at a 12.3-acre site located on Chow Lane in Horry County, approximately eight miles northeast of Conway, SC. The site is bordered by Chow Lane to the south, a wooded area to the west, Maple Swamp to the north, and a residential area to the east. A proposed reclamation plan to restore the site to grassland and a lake/pond has been submitted with the application.

This webpage has been developed by DHEC as a community resource and will be updated as new information is made available. Please bring this webpage to the attention of others you know who may be interested.

**Existing General Mine Operating Permit Coverage**

On September 1, 2023, Adrian Sand LLC was granted coverage under General Mine Operating Permit GP1-002406 "Mining General Permit for the Excavation of Topsoil or Sand/Clay." Coverage under this general permit allowed mining operations limited to the excavation of topsoil or sand/clay affecting an area no greater than five (5) acres, a maximum depth of twenty (20) feet, and with no further material processing.

The General Mine Operating Permit was issued on November 18, 2014. A general permit undergoes public notice and comment procedures prior to issuance or renewal, therefore additional public notice and comment procedures are not required if an applicant requesting coverage has demonstrated that its proposed operation meets all terms and conditions of the general permit. An individual Mine Operating Permit must be applied for if operations exceed or do not meet this criteria.

Documents related to the General Mine Operating Permit Coverage for the Adrian Sand/Clay Pit, which precedes the current pending permit action, are available below:

- Application for Coverage Under General Mine Operating Permit GP1 "Mining General Permit for the Excavation of Topsoil or Sand/Clay" - April 26, 2023
- Map of Adjacent Land Uses and Distances to Nearest Homes - April 6, 2023
- Request for Wetlands Delineation and Jurisdictional Determination by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers - March 30, 2022
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Wetlands Delineation & Jurisdictional Determination - December 21, 2022
- S.C. Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Comment Letter (includes Spotted Turtle Assessment Protocol dated March 2018) - June 9, 2023
- Issued Permit Package for Coverage Granted Under General Mine Operating Permit GP1-002406 (includes cover letter, permit, reclamation plan, CZC certification and map) - September 1, 2023
- General Mine Operating Permit Inspection Report - December 20, 2023

**What to Expect After the Public Comment Period Closes**

After the public comment period closes on May 22, 2024, DHEC will review and consider all comments received and determine if any modifications should be made to the mine permit application. Additional information may also be requested from the applicant. If needed, DHEC will then make a final decision to approve or deny a mine operating permit for the proposed Adrian Sand/Clay Mine.

Once a final permit decision is made, DHEC will provide notification to:

- Everyone on our mailing list for the proposed Adrian Sand/Clay Mine;
- Everyone who attended the public meeting/hearing (provided legible contact information was given); and
- Everyone who provided written comments during the public comment period.

The final permit decision will also be posted on this webpage. A summary response to all comments received will also be made available if a mine operating permit is issued.

If you would like to be on our mailing list, please complete our [registration form](#).

**Filing a Request for Final Review**

DHEC's decision on the mine permit application becomes final (30 calendar days after notice of the decision has been mailed to the applicant, permittee, licensee, and affected persons who have requested in writing to be notified, unless a written request for final review accompanied by a filing fee in the amount of \$100 is filed with DHEC by the applicant, permittee, licensee or affected person.

Additional information on requesting a final review by DHEC's Board can be found in [DHEC's Guide to Board Review](#).

**DHEC is Restructuring**

On July 1, 2024, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) becomes two separate agencies — the South Carolina Department of Environmental Services (SCDES) and Public Health (SPH). DHEC's current appeal process will change with this restructuring. Should a final permit decision be made following this date, information on the new appeal process will be provided with the decision and on this webpage.

**South Carolina Mining Council**

The SC Mining Council resides in the Office of the Governor and acts as an advisory body to the Governor in considering issues relating to mining. The Council considers appeals on decisions made by DHEC regarding the enforcement of South Carolina's Mining Act.

**Stay Connected - Community Engagement**

DHEC is committed to providing meaningful opportunities to hear the questions and concerns of community members and share information on our permitting processes. DHEC offers multiple ways to connect with our staff during the permitting process and beyond, including:

- Calling or connecting with DHEC staff to discuss the proposed project one-on-one.
- Submitting a written comment or question.

<sup>35</sup> SCDHEC. Adrian Sand/Clay Mine - Horry County. (n.d.). <https://scdhec.gov/environment/environmental-sites-projects-permits-interest/adrian-sandclay-mine-horry-county>.



**Email:**

The present email system could be improved to reach a broader audience. One simple but effective way to achieve this is by adding an automatic email sign-up subscription option directly on the website. Based on the general survey, only 40% of respondents subscribe to the email list, with most indicating an email preference. Currently, signing up requires contacting TDEC to be added to an Excel sheet, and by integrating a service like GovDelivery or another similar platform, sign-ups could be automated, leading to an improvement in the email system. This would allow emails to be tailored based on user's preferences, track key metrics, and gather feedback to refine content. Other states have successfully implemented these systems, allowing for more targeted communication on regional issues and public notices.

Additionally, I recommend expanding the email sign-up options beyond public notices. For example, TDEC could offer subscriptions for events, hearings, music festivals, and other relevant activities. To boost sign-ups, consider promoting the email subscription through the website, social media, and events. Flyers in public spaces like libraries, post offices, and schools could also help raise awareness, as surveys show that many people rely on community groups for information. Although regional newsletters are already in place, implementing weekly or monthly TDEC email newsletters to update the public on activities near them could further increase engagement and participation.

Internal employees at TDEC also pointed out that more information across divisions regarding public notice sign-ups is needed. They suggested improving internal communications and providing more precise guidelines for managing email sign-ups to ensure more consistency and better coordination.

**Newspaper:**

The public survey indicated that none of the participants noticed public notices in local newspapers, which aligns with the finding that only 20% of people regularly read the local paper. I recommend diversifying communication channels to include social media, community bulletin boards, and newsletters. If newspapers remain a preferred option for some, focus on local outlets to promote virtual events and share short, relevant updates, particularly for smaller communities where newspapers still play a key role.

**Signage:**

To improve signage accessibility, I believe it's essential first to understand where people would typically see signs. I recommend using clear signage that includes URLs or QR codes for easy online access. Other states have suggested placing signs in high-traffic areas, community centers, and other local spaces directly serving the affected communities, ensuring visibility and greater engagement. States have also recommended partnering with local organizations like HOAs and churches to help decide where the best location is to place signage, especially for communities with limited access to digital resources.

## Social Media:

Based on the survey, 80% of respondents indicated they do not engage with TDEC's current social media accounts. To reach a broader audience, especially a younger demographic, I suggest adding an Instagram account to complement existing platforms. This would help target a demographic that may not be reached through other methods. Additionally, social media could be used more effectively for event promotion and real-time engagement, with targeted ads aimed at specific communities based on region or interest.

## HEARINGS AND MEETINGS

Feedback from the rock quarry public hearing survey highlighted several areas for improvement. Attendees expressed a desire for more transparent and direct communication, including complete answers to their questions. They also requested that meetings be held in the affected communities to improve accessibility and that different departments collaborate to address overlapping issues in one session. Participants emphasized the need for more advance notice of meetings and additional information beyond the PowerPoint slides, with a particular focus on answering written questions. Many also noted that presentations were often too text-heavy and challenging to hear, suggesting that more time be allocated for questions and discussions. Additionally, there was a clear need for presenters to be well-informed and capable of providing detailed answers. It was also recommended that each participant be limited to one question to keep discussions focused.

Based on the general survey, 40% of respondents were satisfied with their experience and felt their questions were addressed, while 60% voiced concerns. To enhance engagement and connection, one suggestion was to hold two public meetings for each proposed permit: one at the beginning of the process and another after but before certification. This would allow more opportunities for community input and help address concerns about perceived biases. South Carolina Department of Environmental Services agreed with this stance, stating they have committed to holding an informal meeting or event before a public hearing takes place. They have found this helps to provide context and allow community members to ask questions and raise concerns in a less formal setting, reducing misunderstandings and better preparing attendees for the formal hearing.

Respondents also noted that their concerns or questions were often left unaddressed after the meetings, so I recommend improving follow-up and transparency by responding to unanswered questions and comments. This would demonstrate that TDEC values community feedback and is committed to addressing public concerns. Along these lines, other states also recommended sending follow-up emails after public hearings and meetings with summaries of discussions, next steps, and links to additional resources or feedback surveys. Additionally, states recommended sending surveys after public hearings to gather feedback on improving the engagement process to avoid high tensions during hearings.



Other states found that partnering with community leaders helped boost attendance at public meetings, and this could be a useful strategy for TDEC. Additionally, promoting hybrid meetings and providing clear instructions for virtual participation can make meetings more accessible to a wider audience. Internal employees at TDEC mentioned that the transition to hybrid meetings has improved accessibility but that logistical challenges still exist. They pointed out that managing multiple hearings in a short time frame is difficult and that inconsistent communication among team members has made managing public hearings sometimes more complicated. To address this, I recommend offering additional staff training for those involved in public hearings to improve coordination and reduce inefficiencies. Developing better tools for planning and managing public hearings, especially when they need to be scheduled back-to-back, would also improve overall efficiency. States agreed with this recommendation, stating that regularly training staff on the best practices and new policies ensures consistency across the department, ensuring staff is well-equipped to handle public questions and concerns.

## ADA COMPLIANCE AND DISABILITY ACCESS

Survey respondents indicated that TDEC facilities are accessible, but ongoing assessments and improvements are necessary to ensure full participation from all community members. A good practice adopted by other states is conducting regular accessibility audits and using multiple communication channels to ensure information is inclusive. Based on feedback from Ray Bloomer, I recommend partnering with advisory groups and engaging directly with people who have disabilities to better understand their needs. After insights have been gathered from this community, I suggest follow-up meetings to show how their feedback has led to tangible changes, demonstrating TDEC's commitment to public engagement.

Internal employees at TDEC have praised the agency for its accessibility and the supportive environment it creates. However, they noted ensuring accessibility during hybrid meetings can be challenging, especially with new virtual platforms. Therefore, I suggest continued attention to these logistics as TDEC aims to make hearings and other events as accessible as possible. To increase staff awareness and improve service delivery, I recommend offering general and targeted accessibility workshops. Bloomer's statement that accessibility should go beyond physical spaces and encompass programs and experiences could be a focus for TDEC moving forward.

## LANGUAGE ACCESS

To improve language accessibility, I recommend gathering input from non-English speaking community members to better understand their language needs and partnering with local organizations that serve these communities to provide valuable insights and help ensure more inclusive participation. TDEC could also consider asking for language and accessibility preferences when scheduling or RSVPing for meetings, which would allow for tailored communication and more effective outreach.