

Air & Noise

Noise – Noise Wall Public Outreach

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REASONABLENESS CRITERIA FOR PUBLIC OUTREACH

On federal aid projects, if a noise wall design has met the feasibility criteria outlined in the GDOT noise policy, as well as the noise reduction and cost effectiveness goals under the reasonableness criteria, then all *benefitted* receptors are allowed to vote on whether they would like a noise wall constructed to abate noise impacts. A separate guidebook, *Noise – Assessing Impacts*, discusses GDOT’s “feasibility” and “reasonableness” considerations. As defined in GDOT noise policy, a *benefitted* receptor is one in which at least a 5 decibel (dB) reduction occurs with the noise wall, regardless of whether that *benefitted* receptor was impacted (as determined from the noise assessment).

In compliance with 23 CFR 772 and in coordination with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), GDOT describes its guidance for public outreach in its *Highway Noise Abatement Policy for Federal-Aid Projects*, Section 8.7.2, #3:

Highway Noise Abatement Policy for Federal-Aid Projects
GDOT Office of Environmental Services

For Design-Bid-Build projects, voting occurs when final plans are complete, prior to project let. For Design-Build projects, voting will occur after let of the project and when the Design-Build contractor has completed final plans.

For residential receptors (Noise Abatement Criteria Category [NAC] B receptors as described in 23 CFR 772 – Noise Abatement Criteria), tenants are allowed a single vote, and the owner of the property is also allowed a vote. In cases where the owner lives in the residence, they are allowed two votes; one as owner and one as tenant. For multi-family dwellings such as an apartment complex, each tenant is allowed one vote for the unit they

occupy, but the owner is allowed a vote for every unit they own. For example, each tenant in a 100-unit apartment complex is allowed a single vote for their unit, but the owner is allowed 100 votes. Impacts for all other NAC categories are allowed a single vote per receptor. The vote is a yes or no vote on whether a noise wall is preferred. The vote is not for a particular style, size, wall finish, or specific location.

OUTREACH TOOLS AND METHODS

Techniques and methods used to reach the largest number of *benefitted* receptors will vary, based on factors including location (rural or urban), type of project, and density of receptors. Per the GDOT noise policy, the outreach strategy should be customized for maximum effectiveness. Because one strategy or method will not achieve this goal on every project, a Noise Wall Outreach Plan should be developed by the Noise Specialist for every project. Information included in the Noise Wall Outreach Plan is discussed in more detail in the Documentation section below.

The tools and techniques used to achieve “maximum effectiveness” will vary from project to project. Factors to consider in developing the most effective outreach methods can include, but are not limited to, age demographics, population density, and existing communication infrastructure (i.e., existing Home Owners Associations). The list below is not intended to be exhaustive, and the project team is encouraged to be innovative in their approach and when possible utilize existing resources available through GDOT. For projects being developed by consultants, open discussions with the Office of Environmental Services (OES) is vital.

1. **First Class Mail** – Specifically identified in GDOT Noise Policy, the use of the US Postal Service to deliver ballot materials incorporates an existing delivery infrastructure. Self-addressed stamped ballots are included in the ballot package as a means to ease the voting process. Although the delivery method is developed and in place, one drawback to the use of first-class mail is that there is no way to verify that every intended *benefitted* receptor has received a ballot.
2. **Door Hangers or “Leave Behinds”** – Hand delivering ballot information and leaving on mailboxes or hanging on front doors is an effective means to verify and document that every intended *benefitted* receptor has received a ballot package. This method can be labor intensive. However, GDOT District personnel may be available to help with distribution. Also, this practice may not be allowed by owners or management companies at multi-family dwellings.
3. **Public Meetings** – Collecting ballots can be requested as part of public meetings conducted for the project, such as Public Information Open Houses or Public Hearing Open Houses. However, because these types of meetings are open to the public there is potential for non-*benefitted* receptors to cast ballots or provide comments regarding proposed noise walls.
4. **Targeted Meetings** – Targeted meetings specifically to groups of *benefitted* receptors is a better way to ensure the desired audience is engaged. These meetings can be held on-site with the specific *benefitted* receptors and ensures

that any comments or questions are from relevant sources. However, restricting access can be an issue, as in some instances (subdivisions) word may spread to all residences of the subdivision, and as with general public meetings unintended or non-impacted receptors may attend the targeted meeting.

5. **Social Media** – There are numerous social media platforms that can be utilized to distribute information and collect voting information. Use of social media is an advantage for some, as it can be considered more convenient than taking time to travel to and attend meetings. Voting results are instantaneous, and data collected is usually in a format that aids analysis. However, concerns with use of social media include the availability and familiarity with the platform selected. And as with those who view the time commitment to attend meetings a barrier to participation, if the intended audience is not familiar with social media or how to use the platform their use may discourage participation.

SUCCESSFUL OUTREACH METRICS

The ultimate goal from voting efforts is a 100% response to the survey from *benefitted* receptors. However, there may be circumstances where this response goal cannot be achieved. Regardless, the outreach plan should be customized to maximize the number of responses. This may require sending balloting materials several times before the voting process is determined complete. The number of attempts should be determined in consultation with OES Noise team leaders. The minimum acceptable response percentage for a voting sample to be considered valid is 25%, meaning that a response was received from at least 25% of the voting packages submitted to *benefitted* receptors. The voting period for each submittal should be at least 30 days. GDOT, in consultation with FHWA, will ultimately determine when a sufficient effort has been made to reach the maximum number of *benefitted* receptors. The final result on whether the *benefitted* receptors prefer a noise wall is based on 50% plus 1 vote of the ballots received for each wall under consideration.

DOCUMENTATION

Documenting the process of noise wall balloting is a crucial step in the process. It is important to maintain clear and accurate information about the data used, ballot results, and to clearly summarize actions and responsiveness in compliance with GDOT's noise policy and FHWA regulations.

1. **Noise Wall Outreach Plan** – A written plan should be developed for the project that includes information such as the number of walls included in the balloting, the number of *benefitted* receptors for each wall, proposed outreach methods for maximum effectiveness, and follow up strategy, if necessary, to increase participation in the balloting process.
2. **Voting Results Summary Table** – There is no specific template for this table, but at a minimum the table should include the number of ballots sent out, the number returned, the number returned calculated as a percent, and the number of yes and no votes also calculated as a percent. This information should be prepared

- for each wall. Keep in mind this summary table will be used by staff as a snapshot in discussions with FHWA to determine if the outreach effort has been sufficient.
3. Mailing List/Address Database – Keep a database of all *benefitted* receptors that were sent balloting information including name, address, and contact information, if possible.
 4. Receiver Location Figure – As with the Voting Results Summary Table, a figure showing the location of *benefitted* receptors in relation to the proposed noise wall and an indication of whether they responded is valuable in discussions with FHWA.
 5. Noise Summary Report – The report will contain much of the documentation previously generated including the Voting Results Summary Table and Receiver Location Figure. The report should also include a summary discussion of the outreach strategy, any restrictions encountered to achieving a 100% response to balloting efforts, and a clear statement on whether a noise wall is preferred or not.

PROJECT RECORD

At the conclusion of the noise wall outreach process, the Noise Specialist (either in house or consultant) must ensure that the following items are finalized and added to the project record along with the rest of the noise documentation. A complete project record is necessary to demonstrate that all noise wall outreach decisions were made in accordance with GDOT noise policy and FHWA regulations. These items also aid in responding to citizens who inquire about the rationale for the particular outreach methodology used.

1. Noise Summary Report
2. Mailing List/Address Database

Guidebook Revision History

Revision Description	Relevant Sections	Revision Date
Initial Publication	All	5/22/2019
Revision Table Added	Last Page	9/17/2020
Updated Hyperlink Button	Reasonableness Criteria for Public Outreach	4/26/2021