

NEICAC EARL Public Transit

Northeast Iowa Community Action Corporation (NEICAC) is responsible for the planning, programming, and administering of state and federally-funded public transportation services and projects within the five-county region. NEICAC – EARL Public Transit serves as Region 1 Public Transportation Provider for the Iowa Department of Transportation (IDOT), comprised of Allamakee, Clayton, Fayette, Howard, and Winneshiek counties in northeast Iowa. The NEICAC Board of Directors serves as the governing body with three members from each of EARL Public Transit’s service area counties, representing the community's public, low-income, and private sectors.

The five counties in NEICAC have an area of 3,313 square miles, the equivalent of 2,120,320 acres. There are 52 incorporated communities within the region, with only four cities having populations over 2,500 and eight other communities with populations over 1,000. The U.S. Census Bureau counts the total 2020 population for the five counties as 80,379 persons, a decrease of 4.4% since the 2010 census. On average, there are just over 25 people per square mile, less than half the statewide average of 54.5. As a result, engaging residents from across this large, rural region can present challenges. By implementing the public outreach activities outlined in this document, NEICAC believes it will reach and offer all residents ample participation opportunities in the region's transportation public participation process.

PURPOSE

The Public Participation Plan for NEICAC- EARL Public Transit was developed to ensure all members of the public, including minorities and Limited English Proficient (LEP) populations, have meaningful opportunities to participate in the decision-making process for NEICAC.

REGULATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS

NEICAC EARL Public Transit functions under a wide variety of federal and state requirements. The list below provides an overview of the basic laws and regulations EARL operates within.

Federal Requirements:

- ▷ Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990
- ▷ Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- ▷ Executive Order 13166 -- Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency
- ▷ Executive Order 12898 -- Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations

State of Iowa Requirements:

- ▷ Open Public Meetings Act

GOALS

The Public Participation Plan works to promote meaningful opportunities for the public, including low income, minority, and limited English proficient populations, to be involved in the identification of potential impacts of proposed transportation decisions by NEICAC EARL Public Transit.

The specific goals of NEICAC’s public outreach efforts include:

Transparency

- The process should clearly identify and communicate where and how participants can have influence and direct impact decision-making.
- Identify and assess local and regional public transportation needs and changing conditions and to provide a forum of those changes.
- Provide and promote transportation for elderly, disabled, low income individuals, LEP, commuters and the general public in Allamakee, Clayton, Fayette, Howard & Winneshiek Counties.

Participation

NEICAC EARL Public Transit customers and the general public should have the opportunity to participate in key decisions, such as having multiple options for how they receive critical information and share feedback.

Accessibility

Every effort is made to ensure that participation opportunities are physically, geographically, and linguistically accessible.

Diversity of Input

Participants represent a range of socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural perspectives, with representative participants including residents from low-income neighborhoods, ethnic communities, residents with limited English proficiency, and other traditionally underserved people.

PRINCIPLES

Public participation at NEICAC is based on the following principles:

- ⊕ **Proactive and Timely** - Participation methods should allow for early involvement and be ongoing and proactive so participants can influence decisions.
- ⊕ **Tailored** – NEICAC’s public participation methods should be tailored to match local and cultural preferences as much as possible.
- ⊕ **Authentic and Meaningful** – NEICAC should support public participation as a dynamic and meaningful activity that requires teamwork and commitment at all levels of the organization.
- ⊕ **Clarity in potential for influence** - NEICAC should communicate to those giving input the factors weighing in the decisions, so they are clear on the potential for influence. In addition, staff should communicate the results of the public’s input in terms of the impact on decisions at a broad summary level, providing the major themes, the decisions reached and rationale for the decisions.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public Participation is an open process that seeks out and encourages early and continuous public involvement throughout the development of transportation plans and projects as part of the transportation planning process. NEICAC encourages citizen input.

The Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission (UERPC) is committed to the availability of timely, complete information to the notification of and public access to the decision-making process and ongoing public involvement throughout the transportation planning process, including, but not limited to, the development of the Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP). UERPC aims to identify methods for obtaining public input and encouraging public involvement in transportation planning. The TIP is the responsibility of UERPC.

The recommendations in the Public Participation Plan reflect feedback from EARL riders and the general public, as well as best practices in the field. EARL Transit also has close relationships with many human services organizations that provide feedback on how NEICAC EARL Transit can best communicate with the populations they serve.

PUBLIC INPUT POLICY

The methods described in the Public Participation Plan cover a range of ways in which NEICAC engages with its customers and the general public. NEICAC understands that decisions about budgets as well as reduction in services or increase in fares are of particular importance, and therefore NEICAC has the following guidelines when considering such changes:

Major Service Changes and Fare Changes

NEICAC and any of its purchase of service contractors will solicit public input on major service reductions and fare increases. A major service reduction is defined as decreases that represent a net loss of fifty percent (50%) or more of total service miles or fifty percent (50%) or more of transit hours of operation for any individual service. Major service reductions and fare increases will meet the following public input requirements:

- Changes will be published for public review and comment no less than 15 days before the proposed changes.
- A minimum of one public meeting will be held to gather comments within 15 days of the published notice.
- Public comment is always welcome at regularly scheduled NEICAC Board meetings.
- Notice of the final changes will be posted within 15 days of implementation.
- NEICAC Board of Directors will be given a verbal and/or written summary of public input and must approve all significant changes.

Annual Consolidated Transit Application

A public hearing must be held for the annual consolidated transit funding application.

Iowa's Consolidated Transit Funding Application is used by all transit agencies to apply for State funds and Federal 5310, 5311, and 5339 funds. Any system applying for statewide 5339 capital funds must include its request in the consolidated application.

OBJECTIVES

- Inform the public of opportunities available and document opportunities region-wide.
- Provide sufficient information for the public to participate effectively and develop ways for the public to provide input and comment.

ACTIONS

- Identify potential interested parties.
- Contact private organizations/groups with an interest or stake in the result.
- Keep elected officials well informed.
- Present facts behind recommendations, i.e. criteria for TIP
- Allow the public to respond to alternatives and state preferences.
- Allow for open and productive group discussions.

MINORITY, LOW-INCOME, & TRADITIONALLY UNDERSERVED INVOLVEMENT EFFORT

NEICAC EARL Public Transit is committed to ensuring all citizens of Region 1, especially low-income, minority, and traditionally underserved populations, have sufficient access to NEICAC meetings and are given every opportunity to voice their opinions.

As a recipient of federal funding, pursuant to Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Title VI regulatory guidance, and in the course of conducting public outreach and involvement, NEICAC EARL Public Transit will consider the viewpoints of minority and low-income populations, as well as individuals who do not fluently speak English.

Preferred Customer Communication Techniques

NEICAC understands the importance of tailoring communication and public participation techniques to the preferences of intended audiences. The primary audience is EARL customers for most aspects of service planning and communication about NEICAC EARL Public Transit's services. In order to understand who NEICAC EARL Public Transit's customers are, the following information will be collected in 2025 as part of a biannual customer satisfaction survey:

- How customers prefer to receive key updates, such as fare and service changes from NEICAC
- How customers prefer to share feedback with NEICAC
- Demographic information such as race and household income.

The survey results will be analyzed and results updated in this plan.

Customer service information from NEICAC EARL Public Transit customers was collected primarily through surveys conducted in 2024. Responses indicate that drivers were courteous and friendly, they offered assistance, the seats were clean, and their driver drove safely to their destination. Additional open-ended comments and suggestions included:

- Very pleased with everything/Everything was good
- Wondering about financial questions
- More Drivers/More drivers like him
- Really like Rich or Mac

In PY24, EARL Public Transit demographics included 673 elderly and 1555 disabled riders.

DIRECT COMMUNICATION METHODS

The Public Participation Plan identifies a menu of available methods for providing information to NEICAC customers and the general public. While these communication methods are broadcast widely, they are important tools in reaching minorities and LEP populations. These include:

- **NEICAC's Website:** www.neicac.org is one of our primary sources of information.
- **On-board fliers:** Placed in highly visible areas of all our buses, they communicate directly with NEICAC's riders.
- **Emails to partner agencies and human services providers:** This may include notices, announcements, promotional materials, or letters to key staff members to distribute.. United Way and other Human Service agencies that serve diverse populations. This also includes local partner public health departments, which operate programs such as WIC, Family Planning, Immunization clinics, and other health services, making them key partners in assisting NEICAC in spreading important information.

- **Press Releases:** These aim to generate news coverage of NEICAC changes, meetings, etc. They are distributed via email to the NEICAC media contact list, including a local newspapersradio stations. They are also posted on NEICAC's Website and the EARL Public Transit section of NEICAC's website. Staff will follow up to inquire about receipt and potential coverage of the press release.
- **Partner's Websites:** NEICAC provides information to partner agencies, including our region's County and City websites, which are frequented by NEICAC riders and the public. This distribution ensures we reach the diversity of populations in each county we serve.
- **Public Notices:** These are published in the newspapers, the NEICAC website, and NEICAC's main office.
- **Targeted Markets:** Examples include, but are not limited to, churches, especially those that serve large communities minority communities; —ethnic services such as Refugee Services and services to marginalized individuals.
- **NEICAC's & EARL Public Transit Facebook Page:** This social media platform informs and interacts with transit customers. Customers can contact us via Facebook and will receive a response from staff within one business day.
- **NEICAC Quarterly Newsletter:** NEICAC gathers all agency program information, including EARL Public Transit data, to create an electronic newsletter that is shared with subscribers. Stakeholders can subscribe to receive NEICAC's newsletter via the agency website, www.neicac.org.
- **Transportation Advisory Group (TAG):** NEICAC partners with UERPC and utilizes the already formed TAG, a group of community stakeholders and business representatives interested in advancing and improving public transportation. The TAG is a liaison between local communities, business representatives, agency representatives, and NEICAC. The TAG provides local and regional input regarding transportation issues important to the region.

All communication methods are available for translation or interpretation upon request.

METHODS OF INVOLVING THE PUBLIC

NEICAC EARL Public Transit employs methods for involving the public in NEICAC's decision making process. Staff consider a number of factors when designing public outreach such as the magnitude of the proposed change or decision, what level of influence public opinion has over the decision, and who will be impacted by the decision.

NEICAC's public involvement methods include:

- 🗣️ **Open Meetings** – The NEICAC Board of Director's meetings on the 4th Monday of each month at 6:00 pm. Meetings are a hybrid of in-person and virtual formats. These meetings are open to the public.
- 🗣️ **Public Hearing** – A public hearing is required by federal or state regulations where comments from the public go into the public record. A public hearing is governed by rules concerning who speaks when and for how long and is overseen by a NEICAC staff/official. A public hearing is not a question-and-answer format.
- 🗣️ **Surveys** – Surveys are a series of specific questions, often in multiple-choice format that can be distributed in print form as well as in digital form. The results from surveys can be quantified and analyzed, but are not as conducive to broader, more open-ended discussions.
- 🗣️ **General Comments** – NEICAC is always open to and accepting of public comments, regardless of whether they were given as part of an organized effort. Comments can be shared with NEICAC's Transportation Director by phone at 563-387-4928, by email at transitinfo@neicac.org, or by mail at PO Box 487 – Decorah, IA 52101, or in person at NEICAC's Smith Building Corporate Office.

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETIVE SERVICES

NEICAC’S program for providing translation and interpretive services is critical to the success of the Public Participation Plan in reaching minority and LEP populations. The program provides translation and interpretive services upon request:

- In person
- Over the phone
- Public meetings
- For vital documents

More details on NEICAC’s strategy and resources to ensure that language is not a barrier for people to take full advantage of NEICAC’s services can be found in the NEICAC Language Assistance Plan (attached to this PPP).

IN SUMMARY

The Public Participation Plan will direct the notification of the public, elected officials, committee members, state agencies, and interested parties of the opportunity to provide and receive information and participate in dialogue concerning transportation in NEICAC Region 1.

NEICAC may modify public participation methods over time based on customer and general public feedback. This Participation Plan is a living document updated periodically to reflect communication and outreach methods.