



NORTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT of
COMMERCE

2023-2025

Public Access and Participation Plan for North Carolina



**OUR MISSION IS TO IMPROVE
THE ECONOMIC WELL-BEING
AND QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL
NORTH CAROLINIANS.**

N.C. Department of Commerce

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Introduction (Mission, DEI & First in Talent)

The **North Carolina Department of Commerce** (Commerce) recognizes that all residents of North Carolina have the right to access government services, to meaningfully contribute to government decisions, and to share equitably in the benefits of a prosperous North Carolina.

To that end, we are committed to conducting and communicating the business of North Carolina openly and transparently – and in an equitable and inclusive manner. We prioritize public awareness, two-way public engagement and communication, and value public involvement and input in developing policies and programs that best serve the people of North Carolina. We understand that the people’s business should continuously expand to reflect and represent the collective diversity of the State’s growing population and the evolving needs of each community.

The formal establishment of a “Public Access and Participation Plan” will help support our ongoing efforts to serve all people of North Carolina and serve as a guide to ensure continued open communication, public participation and engagement.

Commerce has a clear mission. We understand our role is to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for all North Carolinians. To do that, we work closely with local, regional, national, and international organizations to propel economic, community and workforce development for the state.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is a top priority at Commerce. That's why, in 2021, we established the first DEI Office in Commerce history, dedicated to advancing this important area of corporate governance and our society.

We celebrate the differences that make each North Carolinian, Commerce employee, culture, region, community, industry and business unique, and are committed to prioritizing DEI in everything we do – from employee relations to business practices, to collaborations and partnerships within the economic and workforce development community. Our goal is to lead by example in cultivating an environment – and state – where all people feel valued, respected, and safe to bring their whole self to work. North Carolina’s economy should be one that works for *all* people of this great state.

Within today’s business environment, diversity, equity, and inclusion aren’t simply moral concerns, but also key elements for economic growth.

The Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion – and Commerce overall – look forward to working with partners, both public and private, to achieve goals outlined set out in the state’s [**First in Talent Economic Development Strategic Plan**](#).

Equity is a key factor in job creation, workforce development and our state’s post-pandemic recovery. We are working to ensure all North Carolinians reap the benefits of new investments and structural improvements made across the state. Collaborating with our partners statewide, we aim to improve the social determinants of health, like economic stability, environment, healthcare, and education, that may help or hinder an individual’s pathways to economic

prosperity, as well as “...bolster a robust small business recovery, inclusive of opportunities for new entrepreneurs and women-and-minority owned firms,” which is one of the strategies identified in the First in Talent plan to prepare North Carolina businesses for success.

However, we also acknowledge that there is more that we can do to reach individuals and communities across the state who may be unaware of and underserved by our programs. This includes communities of color, Indigenous communities, and low-and moderate-income communities, including our rural areas. Consequently, it is necessary for us to intentionally create and foster opportunities for these communities to be more meaningfully engaged as partners and stakeholders in our agency’s decision-making and discourse.

At the same time, building a more inclusive society affects and requires the participation of all North Carolinians. While our strategies may shift to better accommodate and reflect new information within this living document, we have developed this initial “**Public Access and Participation Plan**” to better understand where gaps exist, and to encourage greater participation from individuals across the state in all areas of our programs and operations.



Improved outreach and public engagement will be critical for Commerce to be successful in meeting our mission. Our priority is to serve all North Carolinians, ensuring that our economy is one that works for all people of this state. To this end, our initial Public Access and Participation Plan strives to:

- Build upon current internal trainings to increase agency staff awareness and sensitivity to the value of incorporating the perspectives of underserved populations — especially from communities that have been historically overlooked or under resourced— in agency activities and decision-making;
- Develop staff facilitation capacity to further meaningful public participation during agency public meetings;
- Expand staff capacity to represent the agency to the public, and to be responsive to constituents who contact our agency for information and seeking help;
- Improve the methods or platforms for public access and communication, to increase transparency and better enable meaningful participation; and
- Adopt metrics for measuring success in public access and participation.

Existing Commerce Public Participation or Involvement Plans: See below for a list of other public participation or involvement plans pertaining to specific Commerce-managed programs or grants, as directed by state or federal requirements:

- **North Carolina Consolidated Plan Partners Citizen Participation Plan**: The State of North Carolina encourages citizens to participate in the planning, implementation, and assessment of the Consolidated Plan for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Planning and Development programs. The “Consolidated Plan” describes how participation will be encouraged.

Part 1: Public Meetings

Public meetings are essential means for members of the public to access agency staff, decision-makers, and proposed agency plans and actions. Public meetings are opportunities to engage communities whose opinions and perspectives, for many reasons, have been overlooked.



To improve public engagement and access, the NC Department of Commerce will:

- Review existing practices governing the conduct of agency public meetings, and adopt new practices, as needed, to promote greater access and meaningful public engagement;
- Consult with sister agencies with experience demonstrating greater access to public meetings; and
- Strive for ongoing improvement of our public access and public participation.

In our review of existing public meeting practices, Commerce will strive to take into account the following considerations to address both known and unanticipated barriers to participation when they emerge:

Timing: Adopting a practice of timing/scheduling public meetings at different hours of the day and days of the week to increase participation.

Notice: Adopting notice practices that exceed statutory or regulatory minimum requirements for public input opportunities, when feasible.

Publicity: Publicizing liberally using various media to promote meeting attendance.

Outreach Partners: Utilizing indirect methods of outreach to publicize proposed state actions, including coordinating with partner organizations to share notices and other information with their networks.

Venues: In addition to providing options for virtual meetings when practicable, intentionally selecting locations in communities to reach underserved populations. The agency will make every effort to ensure that selected venues are physically accessible and provide basic amenities.

Languages: When practicable and appropriate, providing for closed captioning, translation in American Sign Language, and for the top two spoken languages in a community, according to the most recent census.

Non-Technical Information: Providing relevant information and data that is clear, free from jargon, accessible, and in plain language, to a non-technical or lay audience.

Varied Means of Input: When practicable and appropriate, establishing multiple mechanisms for the agency to receive public input.

Part 2: Types of Public Engagement

The N.C. Department of Commerce complies with all state and federal public meeting and legal noticing requirements. In case-by-case situations, Commerce will strive to exceed these requirements to improve community engagement and outreach efforts, especially in underrepresented and underserved communities, including rural areas and in communities of color. Commerce will consider geography, available community information, known barriers, and other relevant data to reach key communities and stakeholders.



Commerce's public engagement and outreach steps may include:

- Distributing media releases through print and virtual media when actions are posted for public notice and public comment.
- Crafting social media and email messages to raise awareness for public notice and public comment events, when appropriate.
- Communicating with interested and impacted stakeholders, such as community members, local and Tribal governments, local businesses, community organizations, and non-profit organizations that have expressed an interest in or may be directly affected by Commerce's proposed actions or recommendations.
- Convening in-person meetings and listening sessions with interested and impacted stakeholders.
- Updating, maintaining, and improving the use of Commerce's stakeholder contact databases, including email listservs, stakeholder outreach and engagement lists, and media lists.
- Providing both virtual and in-person opportunities for meetings at times and locations that are convenient, accessible, and culturally appropriate for interested and potentially impacted communities.

Part 3: Plan Elements for Website Improvement

The Department of Commerce strives to maintain and keep current its website and virtual presence. Commerce is committed to ensuring our website is designed with a focus on user accessibility and experience, providing portals for engagement, and improving the public's understanding of agency goals and activities.



The N.C. Department of Commerce will strive to:

- Review all website language describing agency policies, programs and processes, and, where appropriate, update content with clear, free from jargon, accessible, and plain language, readily accessible to a non-technical or lay visitor.
- Consult with sister agencies that have taken steps to improve access to their websites; and
- In our review of website content, Commerce will strive to address the following barriers:

Non-Technical Information: Conveying information that is clear and accessible. Even technical information should, to the extent practicable, be set out in an easy to understand and non-technical manner.

Languages: Adding toggle language translation tools (e.g. Google Translate) in the top spoken languages in the state according to the most recent census. Where practicable, translating key informational materials in the top two spoken languages in the state.

Varied Means of Input: Providing multiple methods for the public to provide input to the agency through the website, including using general comment portals, hotlinks to email staff or programs directly, listing staff telephone numbers, and open-ended surveys.

The N.C. Department of Commerce has staff serving as “environmental justice (EJ) liaisons” for the agency. These individuals may be subject matter experts, or they may serve as the connector between an agency subject matter expert and the public. The agency will post contact information for our EJ liaison on the website.

Part 4: Staff Training

To continue building staff appreciation of the barriers faced by communities whose residents are Black, Indigenous, Latino or people of color, and to be better prepared to make agency processes more open to these communities, Commerce staff will be offered ongoing DEI- and EJ-related training.



Part 5: Ongoing Improvement of Public Access and Participation

Publishing this Public Access and Participation Plan is an important step in our agency's ongoing commitment to create more accessible and responsive state government. However, this is a first step, and we recognize the need for a process that will ensure continued improvement of the plan. A commitment to ongoing review and evaluation will ensure that this plan yields desired outcomes.

As such, and to ensure that it is enhancing public access, engagement, and participation, Commerce will strive to conduct a program review every two years following this plan's adoption, that considers:



1. **Plan impacts:** a demonstration that Commerce is providing opportunities for meaningful public engagement and participation.
2. **Plan success:** whether the plan meets the goals and, where appropriate, whether agency actions and decisions reflect public engagement and participation.
3. **Future improvements:** the agency, with public stakeholder input, will conduct review and analysis of key metrics, and incorporate improvements within the Public Access and Participation Plan.

The N.C. Department of Commerce is committed to implementing this Public Access and Participation Plan in its conduct of the people's business in North Carolina. All Commerce staff will be notified of the plan and trained in its implementation to ensure consistency across programs. The Department will continue to perform its work with openness and transparency, with an intentional focus and recognition of diversity, equity and inclusion on behalf of *all* people of our State. As Commerce applies the strategies and methods set out in this plan, we expect to be better stewards of the State's resources and programs and become better partners with the diverse people and communities we serve.