



VIRTUAL MEETINGS:

Guide to Virtual Hazard Mitigation Planning Meetings

This document details tips, resources, and potential platforms to facilitate and host effective virtual hazard mitigation planning meetings.

In any community, many stakeholders or planning partners can provide valuable input into the mitigation planning process, from local officials to regional planning authorities, local businesses, non-profits, and the public. Engaging these stakeholders throughout the hazard mitigation planning process ensures its success—but how can you do so successfully through virtual engagement?

Communities have different approaches to engaging partners, including meetings, open houses, conference calls, or webinars. As virtual strategies become more common, it's important to consider tips that make these as dynamic and interactive as face-to-face meetings. Collecting and recording feedback, which happens throughout the hazard mitigation planning process, can be done remotely using tips and tools that are readily available. In this guide, you'll find scalable ideas for making your virtual hazard mitigation planning process a success.

There are many ways to meet engagement requirements in the plan process: webinars, conference calls, direct phone calls, email exchanges, and forms or surveys. Webinars and conference calls are the most common alternatives to meeting in-person with jurisdictions. Direct phone calls and emails are useful to share important updates and reminders. Forms and surveys can help you solicit specific feedback on plan components. A multi-faceted approach can also help ensure you have received feedback from as many stakeholders as possible. No matter what method you use, be sure to consider simple ways you can improve the message.

SIMPLE TIPS FOR BETTER VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

- **Get Ready** – prepare for your meeting by sending out an agenda in advance and, when you can, allow participants to co-create the agenda to ensure there is more buy-in and interest in participating.
- **Start Strong** – when you start your meeting, consider sharing your video and encouraging participants to do the same to make your discussion feel more connected. Remind participants to mute their phones. Try including an icebreaker, along with introductions, when engaging new groups. Remember, when you are on a video conference, people can hear and see how you are feeling, so project your positive side when delivering information.
- **Respect Time** – start and end your meeting on time. Create a clear structure that follows your agenda and share it early in the presentation. You can even add a progress bar to your slides. Finally, make sure that your virtual meeting does not exceed 2 hours.
- **Mix It Up** – plan for two or three people to speak on a call, so people hear a variety of voices. Don't make your meetings solely a report out; that's what emails or print media are for. Use your meetings to discuss and problem solve.
- **Be Visual** – use smart design principles in your presentation that are not too text-heavy. Where possible, turn text into graphics and images that support your talking points. The presentation should be designed with the experience of the audience in mind.
- **Be Interactive** – call out names to engage your audience and provide time for additional questions or feedback at the end of the call. Explore the capabilities of your meeting platform beforehand to see whether you can use polls, breakout rooms, and whiteboards for real-time collaboration.
- **Plan Ahead** – anticipate technical issues by sending slides to participants in advance and ensuring participants have access to your platform. Provide a separate dial-in option for participants unable to join a webinar. Test all equipment and embedded video and audio by doing a practice run.



VIRTUAL STRATEGIES THROUGHOUT THE PLANNING PROCESS

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) requires participation from each community seeking plan approval during plan development. Stakeholders and the public must also be given the opportunity to be involved in the planning process. However, there is no requirement for how this happens. You have the freedom to define a planning process that works for your community, and that includes using digital tools and alternative methods of outreach.

Whether you are organizing a virtual meeting or passing along guidance to another organizer, there are different approaches that you can consider and discuss to ensure you're designing the meeting with the audience in mind.

Initial Stakeholder Engagement

Use social media channels to meet stakeholders where they are and inform them about the upcoming planning process. Messages or short recorded videos shared on social media can help you get the word out about the importance of stakeholder involvement. While virtual engagement is ideal for maintaining face-to-face connections, remember that getting the word out is also effective through more traditional methods like radio, newspaper, mailers, and television. You can use your own networks if they can share information in newsletters or other communication channels. All these methods can help you share why stakeholder input is important, and how people can get involved. Whatever your approach, keep your message simple and direct.

Example: Region II is working with the U.S. Virgin Islands to record a short video message that encourages new stakeholders to participate in the hazard mitigation planning process.

Connect communities with existing webinars for online training or consider hosting one via a webinar platform that works best for you. (A summary of the features available on different webinar platforms and others is available in a table at the end of this guide.) Training provides an opportunity for communities and contractors alike to learn about the mitigation planning process and all the elements that FEMA requires for the plan, as well as how to make sure plans are usable and implementable by the community.

Example: IS-318, Mitigation Planning for Local and Tribal Communities, is a course offered by FEMA's Emergency Management Institute. It is a 12-hour interactive web-based course for plan writers and reviewers.

Kickoff Meetings

Host the project goals and documents on a website and share with stakeholders in advance of the first meeting. During the kickoff, share an engaging presentation that visually depicts the overall timeline, important considerations and requirements, and expectations for input. Punctuate the presentation with poll questions to learn where there are gaps in understanding or interest in specific issues.

Risk Assessment

When developing the Risk Assessment, it is important to understand the issues of greatest concern to participating communities. Think about creating an online poll, either sent by email or integrated into a presentation, to find out which hazards have the most impact on the community, as well as what assets are most vulnerable. Provide a section for additional comments to help get a more detailed local perspective.



Mitigation Strategy Meetings

Some communities hold meetings with FEMA and the State or Territory to review mitigation strategies in detail. Webinar platforms include tools for making these virtual sessions more collaborative. For example, virtual breakout rooms in some online platforms allow smaller groups to meet in a focused discussion. Real-time brainstorming and notetaking are also possible using screensharing or virtual whiteboards.

Individual Community Meetings

Coordinate with each community to decide which virtual engagement method works best for them. Conference calls or video conferences with a small group can be a suitable low-cost alternative for in-person meetings. These types of meetings provide an excellent opportunity for communities to discuss the direct impacts of hazards on their vulnerable populations and assets. They can then address these vulnerabilities by developing mitigation actions while they have access to an expert to guide them through the process. Consider creating simple, easy-to-use forms that can help guide your discussion and help you stay organized when taking notes.

Providing hard copies of forms and surveys is a good way to engage in areas where there are technological limitations. In each packet, include a cover letter that explains what each form is used for and why it's important, along with contact information for questions. Forms can include a risk evaluation on how hazards have either increased or decreased in their community or a request for a description of development trends since the previous plan, status updates for previous mitigation actions, or new mitigation actions.

Draft Hazard Mitigation Plan Feedback Session

As an alternative to holding public open houses, advertise the draft plan in newspapers and across social media platforms. Design a webpage where people can easily review different plan sections and comment on the plan. After distributing the plan, host and record a webinar or a live social media session where you address suggestions received. Use the chat box for participant questions during the session. If using a webinar platform, consider virtual breakout rooms to have more intimate discussions on different plan components.

Example: Some communities in Region X use Facebook Live to review draft HMPs.

Host the recorded session online along with a feedback form so those who missed your session can still review and provide additional comments.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

When exploring options for virtual engagement, consider inclusive and low-barrier options for those with limited access to technology. Some technologies do not require installation or are easy to set up. Some platforms are available on mobile phones, which may be preferable if individuals are working from home without a computer. Don't forget traditional ways of sharing and getting information out: radio announcements, mail, utility bills, newsletters, television interviews, local newspapers, door hangers, and windshield surveys.

Virtual engagements must also be accessible: consider whether translation is needed when designing your approach and make use of recording, live captions, and transcription capabilities. While recording is an option, it should be done carefully.

Know your local laws when it comes to open meetings and possible recordings. Laws are determined by the State or Territory, and most require consent before recording. Some virtual meeting platforms have optional recording consent functions built in.

Before selecting a virtual meeting tool, confirm that they meet security standards for everyone involved. You can prevent your meeting from being hijacked by unidentified individuals by making the meeting private, not sharing the meeting link on public online forums, using passwords or waiting rooms on certain meeting platforms, and limiting screensharing to the host only.

When choosing a virtual platform, if FEMA will be hosting the call or participating, make sure that you are using their approved methods, as there are security requirements that need to be vetted beforehand.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON VIRTUAL MEETINGS TIPS AND TOOLS

- [What It Takes to Run a Great Virtual Meeting](#)
Harvard Business Review
- [Techniques for Facilitating Virtual Meetings](#)
Office for Coastal Management, DIGITALCOAST, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

