



Delta Counties Coalition

Contra Costa County · Sacramento County · San Joaquin County · Solano County · Yolo County

"Working together on water and Delta issues"

April 1, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL: engage@deltacouncil.ca.gov

Brandon Chapin
Delta Stewardship Council
80 Ninth Street, Suite 1500
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Comments on DSC Draft Public Participation Plan

Dear Mr. Chapin:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Delta Stewardship Council's (Council) Draft Public Participation Plan (Draft PPP or Plan). This letter is written on behalf of the Delta Counties Coalition (DCC), which is composed of elected members from Contra Costa, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Solano, and Yolo counties. The DCC appreciates the work the Council is doing to increase the level of public participation in the Council's activities. As the Delta is the primary focus of the Council's work, it is imperative that Delta communities be included in decision-making, along with other stakeholders.

DSC Meeting Locations

The DCC recommends providing more participation opportunities in the Delta itself. The Delta is a large area, parts of which can be more than an hour drive from Sacramento. Delta residents' work schedules and other commitments make attendance at meetings requiring significant travel time less likely, thereby reducing public participation. While the survey results leading up to development of the Draft Plan indicated that 80-100 people may monitor Council meetings remotely, it is common for Council meetings to be sparsely attended in person by the public. Reliable broadband is also not available in many parts of the Delta, reducing the accessibility of the webcast. Moreover, viewing a meeting via a webcast typically does not allow for the public to provide comments to the Council.

The PPP recognizes that "there is a desire to see the Council meet outside of the Sacramento area more often." (Draft PPP, p. 6.) However, the Plan does not advance this request or make any commitments to meet elsewhere. In the "Meeting Locations" section, the PPP states that meetings take place at "various locations throughout the year, mainly in Sacramento" and that "each year the Council must hold two of its meetings within the boundaries of the legal Delta, but usually meets in the Delta more often." (Draft PPP, pp. 9-10.) For meetings with an agenda item regarding a project with a specific physical location, "attempts will be made to have the Council meeting

location close to the project impact area.” (Draft PPP, p. 10.) None of these statements ensure that more meetings will be held outside of Sacramento, other than what is already required.

In addition to holding meetings within the Delta more often, consideration should be given to occasionally providing satellite meeting locations in the Delta (e.g., at a library meeting room) that would be set up to allow for remote public participation. It may be possible, with minimal staff, to add a satellite meeting location that would allow the public to provide comments via a camera in a laptop computer. Especially for meetings that include important agenda items touching on daily life in the Delta, the Council should endeavor to make it easier for members of the public to participate without travelling long distances.

Active Engagement

The Council should take more actions to build public awareness of the work it is doing and how that work relates to the Delta. Currently, with the plethora of agencies with some role in the Delta, it is likely unclear to much of the public what the Council is doing and why. As the Council is funded with taxpayer funds, more effort should be made to engage the public, particularly in the Delta.

The Draft PPP states that its program was built upon the foundation to “strive to understand how its decisions and work-products impact all affected communities by actively working to involve all interested parties” (Draft PPP, p. 7), but there are no corresponding details about current or future public engagement activities nor any mechanism verifying that public engagement activities are successful. The Draft PPP does not assign responsibility for public engagement to any particular liaison or staff, and continues to rely on members of the public to contact the Council via phone, email or social media.

This passive approach points to the need for more accountability by the Council to implement a real public engagement plan. While the Draft PPP states that Council staff “may convene” advisory groups, and work with stakeholder groups “whenever possible,” this is not a proactive engagement approach. (Draft PPP, p. 14.) In addition to actively seeking input more often, when the Council does convene advisory groups, it should cast a wide net in order to include as many participants as possible. The Council should actively seek out members to provide advice, and then strive to make those engagements meaningful for the participants by incorporating their feedback in the relevant process.

Public Comments

More needs to be done to track the disposition of public comments received by the Council, even where not required by law. It is one thing to listen to comments, but it is another to actually incorporate that input into the Council’s work.

The Draft PPP endeavors “to the maximum extent feasible where not already required by law, to communicate whether (and how) input and public comments were, or were not, incorporated into the final products or decisions and why.” (Draft PPP, p. 7.) The Draft PPP

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vaguely addresses this goal by stating that the Council “considers and addresses public comments in a variety of ways.” (Draft PPP, p. 12.) The PPP then explains that “if required by CEQA or the APA, responses to comments are included in project environmental and rulemaking documents” (Draft PPP, p. 12), highlighting that the Council will only include responses that are required by law, despite stating that the Council would communicate input where not already required by law.

To fill this gap, the Council should create a publicly accessible tracking table or log listing public comments and how they are addressed or resolved. Such a system would allow the public and Council staff to track important issues in a transparent manner. This approach could be used for Council activities that would not otherwise require written responses, and would help the interested public to understand the results of its engagement. This tracking information should be made prominently available on the Council’s website so that the public can easily find it.

In closing, the DCC requests that the Council continue to improve its outreach into and engagement with Delta communities, the geographic area over which the Council’s actions have the most significant impact. Please feel to contact us or our technical staff with any questions regarding these comments.

Sincerely,



Don Nottoli
Supervisor, Sacramento County



Skip Thomson
Supervisor, Solano County



Karen Mitchoff
Supervisor, Contra Costa County



Jim Provenza
Supervisor, Yolo County



Chuck Winn
Supervisor, San Joaquin County