

# St. Cloud Area Planning Organization (APO) Social Media Policy and Guidelines for Use December 21, 2012

## 1. Purpose for Using Social Media

- a. The main purpose for using a social media account and a public website is to communicate transportation information to the public. Social media is used as a tool to enhance public involvement and engagement in the transportation planning process. This tool allows for a cost-effective way to share pertinent information with the public and receive input from a diverse, online audience.

## 2. Policy Support for Using Social Media

- a. The APO's Public Participation Plan (PPP) incorporates FHWA requirements (23 CFR Section 450.316) in the Code of Federal Regulations. Federal regulations require APO draft and final documents "shall be posted on the World Wide Web, to the maximum extent practicable". The PPP also indicates procedures for public involvement throughout the transportation planning process. For example, the document concludes:

- *"The APO strives to consider the needs and involve all stakeholders including, but not limited to, representatives of pedestrian and bicycle facilities, human service agencies providing transportation services to the disabled, citizens (the general public), affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, transportation services for freight, transportation providers, and representatives of users of public transportation."*

Social media assists the APO in achieving communication, participation, and education goals as part of the planning process and fulfills the public involvement implementation guidelines adopted as part of the PPP.

## 3. Definition of Social Media

- a. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines social media as, "forms of electronic communication (such as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)". For the APO's purposes, social media includes portions of the website content such as videos (YouTube), picture slideshows, and comment and survey forms. Most notably, social media includes social networking accounts, specifically, the St. Cloud APO Facebook account. This policy also pertains to future social media accounts developed for the APO including, but not limited to, blog platforms, Twitter, LinkedIn, Vimeo, iTunes, Cinch, photo sharing, and other online-forum participation representing the APO.

## 4. Goals for Use of Social Media

- a. *Inform and Contribute:* To contribute knowledge, experience, and recommendations on transportation issues to the public dialogue on pertinent

topics. To inform the public of recent or on-going transportation plans, projects, or studies in the area.

- b. *Learn:* To learn about transportation issues, opportunities, and obstacles of interest to the public and to gain information regarding local, state, or national transportation activities or trends in transportation policy.
- c. *Educate:* To educate the public on the on-going transportation planning activities conducted by the APO and our partners. Social media is a platform to provide educational materials to the public on numerous topics, for example, new road designs or transportation policies.
- d. *Engage and Involve:* To engage and involve the public to the maximum extent possible in public participation outreach efforts. Social media sites host a large and diverse audience of users and provide a venue to share diverse experience and perspectives. They also provide a convenient mode for the public to provide input on issues without a formal or time-consuming setting.

##### 5. *Employee Etiquette for Posting Material*

- a. APO advises that staff observe the following guidelines in all social media interactions:
  - Do not post anything online you would not feel comfortable seeing formally published. Expectations for staff in the social media realm are similar in most respects to staff engagement in traditional public involvement activities such as public meetings and emails.
  - Provide content that is respectful, knowledgeable, and accurate. Maintain professionalism and do not criticize individuals or organizations with different opinions.
  - Do not engage in online debate or dialogue on social media regarding a specific project or plan. Instead, concerned encourage individuals or organizations to contact the APO via email or phone to address or discuss project specific concerns or issues.
  - Monitor comments (according to the Comment Policy section) and respond in the appropriate manner. Provide general information if requested, or direct specific questions as stated above. If applicable, indicate how feedback will be utilized or incorporated into planning efforts.
  - Maintain confidentiality of data, project information, and personnel information. Respect the timing of the public release of sensitive information.
  - Respect the privacy of individuals. Seek permission from coworkers or project partners before writing or referencing them by name in online conversations.
  - Give credit for text and images from others. Cite text and image sources if you did not author them. For images, if possible, use photos or graphics created by the APO or with permission from a member organization. Otherwise, use an image that is available under a creative commons license and not restricted by copyright. Make sure to cite the source of the image and the name of the person who created it.

- In blog posts or other social media posts, make it clear that you are communicating online in your role as a staff member for the APO.
- Social media may be considered public domain and potentially be subject to data retention requirements. To promote transparency, do not delete social media posts.
- Refer to the APO Personnel Policy for additional expectations about the use of electronic communications technology.

## 6. *Comment Policy*

- a. Comments on social media sites are received by the APO as public input. APO staff will not engage in online debate or dialogue regarding project specific questions or concerns. Instead, APO staff will encourage commenters to contact the APO via email or phone to address specific questions, concerns, or issues or to make formal information requests.
- b. Provide the following policy statement on the social media site (if comments are allowed):
  - “The purpose of this account is to discuss the APO’s planning efforts on a broad range of transportation projects and issues. Your ideas, questions, and concerns are important to our goal of improving our public participation and we welcome your input. Your comment will not be edited, but it will be deleted if it is inappropriately off-topic, promotional, unnecessarily rude, or contains personal attacks. Please focus your points as respectfully as possible. To maintain privacy, we may delete phone numbers or email addresses if they appear in your comments.”

## 7. *Guidelines for Use of Social Media*

### a. APO Website

- The website, [www.stcloudapo.org](http://www.stcloudapo.org), is the primary source of information for our member organizations, the region, and the online world. The website is a resource for committee materials, meeting and event updates, draft and final documents, links to outside agencies and news, and current project updates. It is important to post pertinent and professional information on the website.

### b. APO Facebook Page

- The purpose of the APO’s Facebook page is to create public interaction with Facebook’s large number of users and to meet the goals previously described.
- Posts are brief and more casual. Ideally posts will include messages and photos regarding meetings, projects, field work, or other activities. Facebook is an ideal interface to communicate with other organization’s pages and community members.
- As an “Administrator” on the APO’s page, employees can make posts and respond to questions as the APO.