

# Increasing access and maintaining compliance using virtual tactics

How Harris County Flood Control District was able to keep projects on track *and* engage **2,800+** residents.

## A \$2.5 Billion Bond

Harris County Flood Control District has jurisdiction over 23 watersheds in the Greater Houston region. Emily Woodell with KGBTexas Communications is part of the communications and community engagement consultant team for the Flood Control District, helping to inform and collaborate with the public on upcoming projects and decision making.

In 2018 Harris County voters overwhelmingly approved a \$2.5 billion bond to fund flood risk reduction projects across the county. This meant the Flood Control District was responsible for an influx of projects across the region, as well as a mandate to integrate public engagement and involvement efforts throughout the lifecycle each project included in the bond program.



**? The Question:**

How can you keep community engagement on schedule to ensure projects are not delayed?

# The benefits of Virtual Public Meetings in a “mix-mode” engagement approach

## Community Engagement Goes Virtual

When COVID-19 hit Harris County and the world, the question became: How do we keep community engagement efforts on schedule to ensure projects are not delayed?

With in-person meetings no longer an option, the Flood Control District faced a compounding problem of project delays and that’s when the organization added Virtual Public Meetings to its engagement strategy.

### Outreach & Engagement Tactics

- Virtual Public Meetings
- Social media posts
- Email
- Physical signage
- Mailers
- Community group outreach
- Elected official outreach
- Online surveys with map comments

Harris County is one of the most diverse counties in the country and includes a wide range of non-English speakers, socioeconomic groups, urban and rural areas, which can make community engagement efforts more complex.

Historically, the Flood Control District relied on in-person events to share updates about projects and collaborate with the community. During the pandemic, teams worried engagement would plummet and projects may stall as a result.

### Engagement by the numbers

2,800+

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

2,200+

PUBLIC COMMENTS

2,300+

EMAIL SUBSCRIBERS

1,400+

VPM ATTENDEES

# Virtual Public Meetings built for equity and access

## Record turnouts from hard-to-reach groups

“Since implementing PublicInput’s Virtual Public Meetings, we have seen high turnout and engagement for our efforts across the county, including record high turnout from areas of the county that have been traditionally hard to reach,” said Woodell. “The feedback from the community has been incredibly positive and residents have noted that the platform is incredibly accessible and very easy to use. We focus a lot on equity and access, so the fact that the platform offers options for residents to dial-in or join online was critical.”

## Closing the feedback loop to build public trust and confidence

Using PublicInput’s Communications Cloud, the Flood Control District is also able to automatically create contact lists based on meeting attendees and follow up with participants to keep them updated on projects across the county. The meeting recordings and video clips also enable teams to share information with stakeholders and residents to inform and educate.

“We’re continually closing the loop as we’re talking to different groups, show what people have said, and that it was incorporated into plans moving forward.”

— Emily Woodell; KGBTexas Communications

## Virtual Public Meeting Instructions

There are three ways to leave a comment about this project during tonight’s session or during the comment period from February 4, 2021 through February 18, 2021:

- Submit a comment at [PublicInput.com/CT022](https://PublicInput.com/CT022)
- On the Flood Control District’s website at [hcfcd.org/CT022](https://hcfcd.org/CT022), or
- Via phone at 855-925-2801 with Meeting Code: 7799

Any questions not addressed during tonight’s Q&A will receive a response from the Flood Control District after the event. Meeting information and video will be available on:

- [hcfcd.org/CT022](https://hcfcd.org/CT022)
- The Flood Control District’s YouTube channel

Flood Risk Reduction Near P130-05-00 & P150-05-01  
Project ID: P130-05-000 Board ID: CT022



## Virtual meetings increased engagement “three-fold”

While the Flood Control District, like nearly all public agencies across the country, were required to “go virtual” due to COVID-19, what was thought to be a temporary shift is now revealing something bigger: virtual tactics have increased reach and engagement from their broader communities.

“The level of engagement has skyrocketed,” said Woodell. “When COVID-19 hit, we were concerned our conversations with the public would stagnate. Instead, the Flood Control District is talking to an increasing number of people in each meeting.”

The Flood Control District has seen a three-fold increase in meeting attendance and higher rates of public comments since implementing PublicInput, all while creating an opportunity for project teams and Flood Control District leadership to engage directly with the public.

The Flood Control District has hosted more than 30 Virtual Public Meetings for unique projects between June 2020 and March 2021 with no sign of slowing down.

The screenshot shows a virtual community engagement meeting page for the Flood Control District. The page title is "CI-022 Flood Risk Reduction Near P130-05-00 & P130-05-01". The meeting details are as follows:

- DATE:** Thursday, February 4, 2021
- TIME:** 6:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.
- LOCATION:** Join online at [PublicInput.com/CI022](https://PublicInput.com/CI022) or via phone at 855-925-2801 with Meeting Code 7799

There are two ways to submit comments about this project during the meeting. Any comments or questions not addressed during the live virtual session will receive a response from the Flood Control District after the event.

1. Submit comments via the text box next to the livestream.
2. Call 855-925-2801 with Meeting Code 7799 and press '3' to leave a voicemail comment for the team.

The page also features a video player with the title "CI-022 Flood Risk Reduction Near P130-05-00 & P130-05-01" and a "VIRTUAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEETING" banner. The comments section shows a comment from Sarah Wolfe.

Not only are we getting more people in the virtual door, but we're also able to engage them more effectively and get to the heart of their questions.



## What's the future of public meetings?

Harris County Flood Control District has embraced the platform and its capabilities have created **a lot of opportunity** for the organization.

— **Emily Woodell**; KGBTexas Communications



### **The same public meeting experience, for all residents**

Virtual tactics are here to stay, but with that realization comes a new set of questions and challenges.

As we look toward the future, **hybrid public meetings**, with a combination of in-person and virtual participation, are emerging as the future-proof, more equitable solution for public engagement.

[SEE IT LIVE](#)