



0-6701: Linking Regional Planning with Project Planning in Support of NEPA

Background

Since the enactment of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) in 1970, sponsors of transportation projects that receive federal money or fall under the purview of the federal government in some other way are required to develop documentation that shows the environmental effects of the project were studied and taken into consideration. The time and effort required to complete the NEPA documentation process have increased significantly since 1970, due to new federal regulations, court rulings, and the increased workload on state and federal agencies. As the time and effort required to perform appropriate NEPA reviews have increased, so has the pressure to streamline the process.

One such streamlining technique, linking regional and project planning with NEPA, is the focus of this research. The theory behind this linkage is that numerous actions performed in planning and during NEPA documentation overlap or should overlap. Determining where the overlap occurs and how to take advantage of the overlap is the central purpose of this research.

What the Researchers Did

In order to achieve the research objectives, a sound research methodology was used, and many research activities were performed. The researchers:

- Gathered, analyzed, and synthesized the documentation that has been developed to streamline and advance the NEPA review

process during the planning process and the planning of transportation projects.

- Reviewed recent legal issues and case law that have made the implementation of NEPA policies and guidelines increasingly complex and that may have a bearing on future recommendations the research team may make.
- Interviewed state departments of transportation, metropolitan planning organizations outside of Texas, and federal and state resource agencies to determine what existing best practices have been implemented around the country to effectively link NEPA with transportation planning.
- Interviewed agencies in Texas responsible for environmental reviews and transportation planning to gain an understanding of the current state of the practice in Texas regarding these processes and to identify potential challenges involved with linking the two processes.

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- Developed a series of recommendations that will enhance the links between the planning and NEPA processes.
- Created a resource designed to summarize the main recommendations and provide agencies in Texas with guidance on how to link transportation planning and project planning in support of NEPA.
- Presented the resource in four workshops around Texas to validate its information and suggestions.

What They Found

The research team found that multiple states around the country have begun implementing programs designed to link the planning and NEPA processes and that generally these states have found the programs beneficial. Some of the more prevalent programs include:

- Including NEPA-related content in the planning documents.
- Using statewide geographical-information-system-based data-sharing tools.
- Using coordination and decision points strategically placed through the transportation planning and project development processes.
- Redeveloping environment, planning, and project development manuals to incorporate linkages.
- Cross-training or combining planning and environmental staff.

These programs and others, along with the potential benefits and costs associated with them, are discussed in further detail in Report 0-6701-1. Other broader recommendations, such

as better documentation of the transportation planning process and early stakeholder involvement in the project development process, are also discussed in more detail in the research deliverables.

The research team also found that the existing practice in Texas is often very straightforward; planning agencies and departments develop plans, environmental staff focuses on NEPA matters, and there is little overlap between the two.

While determining the state of the practice in Texas, the research team also identified some considerations that need to be taken into account should any linkage program be implemented in the state. For example, agencies responsible for developing projects in Texas come in a wide variety of sizes and have a wide variety of resources—this diversity should be taken into consideration when implementing a linkage program.

What This Means

Texas can and should implement a program designed to link the transportation planning process with the NEPA process. This program should adopt the recommendations developed through this research and should take into consideration the implementation issues identified in the research report. Implementing such a program would improve communication and coordination between various agencies and would save time and money by reducing duplicative efforts and streamlining the project development process.

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