

# FHWA NEWS



A Publication Produced for and by Federal Highway Administration Employees

Volume 19, Number 8 Holiday Issue 2005/2006

## NHI Offers Hot New Course

By Misun Chang, Jon Obenberger, and Gregg Miller

With comments by Fred Skaer

National Highway Institute (NHI) recently introduced a new course, and the subject appears to be right on target. The three-day course offered by NHI, the training arm of FHWA, is aimed at a broad audience including transportation planners, environmental specialists, highway, bridge, construction, design engineers, and agency managers of Federal, State, and local highway transportation agencies. Consulting firms, private industry, universities—any national and international entity engaged in the planning, design, construction, and management of transportation projects—are all showing interest.

What is this exciting new course? It's called *Context Sensitive Solutions* (course number: FHWA-NHI-142050) and it's the wave of the future in transportation design.

Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) is a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to a transportation project that involves including stakeholders in the development of a transportation facility. Safety, mobility, the preservation of scenic, aesthetic, historic, and environmental resources and community values are all equally addressed throughout the development period. Use of the CSS process can deliver many benefits to an agency. Effective and timely decisions, gaining public trust and support, building positive relationships with resource agencies, delivering safe and financially feasible project solutions, and improving the overall project delivery process—are all benefits realized from CSS implementation.

Why is CSS so important today? Fred Skaer, Director, Office of Project Development & Environmental Review explained:

"It represents a mindset change from *we know best*, to *working together with citizens and representatives of other organizations, we can come up with a great solution*," he says. "You will likely see a greater variety of on-the-ground solutions. For example, not every median barrier will be a bland concrete barrier, special settings will get more landscaping, environmentally sensitive areas will have special environmentally oriented design features. Also, because citizens will have been a more integral part of the solution, there will be greater public acceptance of the solutions."

FHWA's key strategy is to work with its partners to ensure that highway facilities balance local, regional, and national concerns with the scenic, aesthetic, historic, and natural environment, and that they add value to the community. FHWA provides technical assistance to State DOTs in applying CSS concepts within their agencies. FHWA also directly applies CSS concepts within its agency via the Federal Lands Highway (FLH) office, which has an established reputation and expertise in planning, designing, and constructing context sensitive transportation facilities.

By involving so many partners and stakeholders throughout the life of the project, one might think that CSS implementation would hinder flexibility in the design or development stages. However, this is not really the case.

"CSS stresses flexibility in seeking a solution," said Skaer, "Indeed, FHWA's seminal handbook on this issue is titled, *Flexibility in Highway Design*. By using collaborative problem solving techniques we try to seek consensus. Of course, everyone recognizes that it isn't always possible."

When asked how CSS differs from the way FHWA used to develop projects, Skaer recalled, "One State DOT secretary termed the change as one from *Design, Announce, and Defend (DAD)* to *Publicly Owned Projects (POP)*."

This three-day, instructor-led course provides participants with tools and techniques to effectively deliver timely and successful transportation projects. Class attendance is free for FHWA employees. For more information, visit NHI's Web site at <http://www.nhi.fhwa.dot.gov> or contact:

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This page last modified on February 2, 2006

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