

Successes **in** Stewardship

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New Jersey DOT Initiates Outreach and Stewardship for Direct Connection Project

The reconfiguration of a series of highly congested highways in Camden County, New Jersey incorporated exemplary stewardship practices. High accident rates, heavy traffic volumes, and a complex lane design required the reconfiguration of the intersection of Interstates 295 and 76 (I-295 and I-76) and Route 42. This effort, known as the Direct Connection project, offer valuable lessons in public outreach for streamlined project review.

Project Background

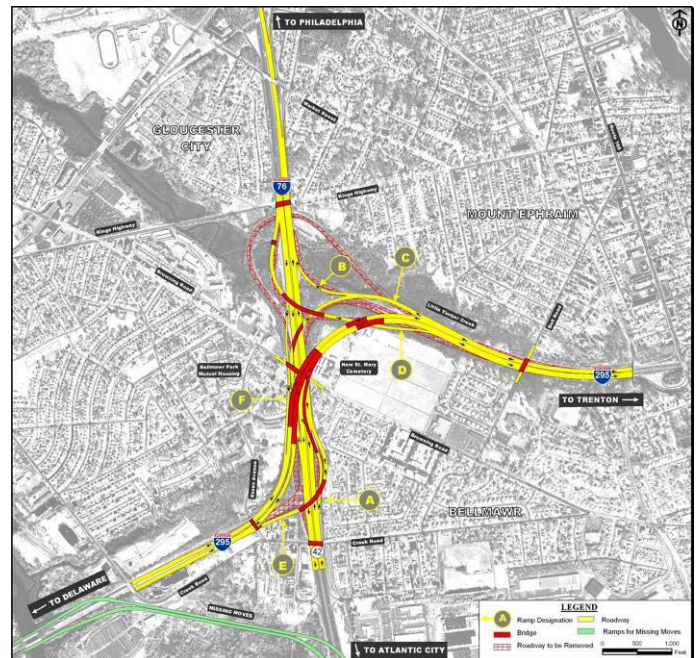
When the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) widened Route 42 in the 1980s, it considered alternative alignments for the interchange to improve roadway safety and congestion. However, NJDOT dismissed several alternatives due to budget constraints, other high-priority projects, and lack of public support. Beginning in the late 1990s, NJDOT and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) again pursued alternative alignments. NJDOT and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) conducted a Transportation Investment Study and recommended a grade-separated interchange.

The new interchange reconfiguration became the Direct Connection project, starting a 12-year planning and design process that will culminate in construction between 2012 and 2017, subject to the availability of funding. NJDOT published the [Final Environmental Impact Statement](#) (FEIS) in the fall of 2008. The interchange is currently in the preliminary design phase. In addition to the goals of relieving congestion and improving motorist safety, the proposed interchange is aimed at enhancing regional economic development, minimizing environmental impacts, preserving quality of life in nearby communities, increasing options for alternative modes of travel, and providing opportunities for intermodal use.

The FEIS analyzed multiple alternatives. Alternative D, the preferred alternative, will provide motorists with three lanes in each direction on I-295, eliminate multiple merging traffic lanes, and upgrade the highway geometry. The redesigned interchange will contain several new or reconstructed bridges, retaining walls, and signs to improve highway safety and decrease noise in nearby communities. (Additional project background information and updates can be found on the [Direct Connection website](#).)

Proactive Public Involvement

NJDOT planned for early community and stakeholder involvement to improve public relations and develop alternatives that fit into the existing site constraints. This early outreach effort was in response to public opposition to the interchange reconfiguration that occurred in the 1980s; the NJDOT–FHWA project team noted that the site would be especially sensitive to public opposition due to wetland areas, housing, and public facilities in proximity to the interchange. Because of congestion on the Interstates, motorists often exit the interchange to follow local roadways and neighborhood streets. The resulting traffic impairs pedestrian safety, increases noise levels, and lowers air quality in surrounding communities.



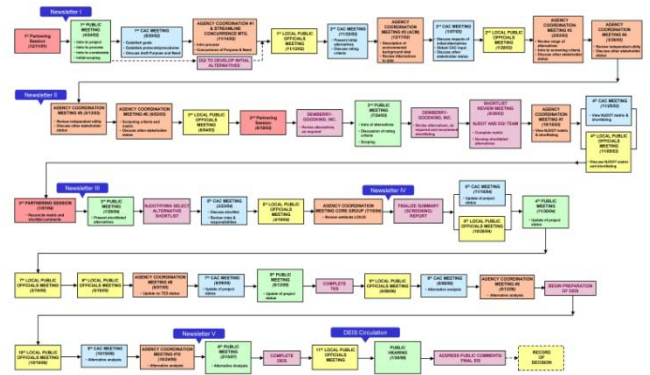
Graphic showing Alternative D, the preferred alternative for the Direct Connection interchange. (Courtesy of NJDOT)

To incorporate community and stakeholder feedback, NJDOT expanded the project area to encompass several residential, commercial, industrial, and public facilities within Camden County communities, including Bellmawr, Mount Ephraim, and Gloucester City. The project team established a detailed Public Involvement Action Plan (PIAP) in 2001 to guide the Direct Connection planning process. Through the PIAP and associated outreach activities, NJDOT was able to improve stakeholder and community relations, incorporate public feedback into the alternatives, and keep the public updated on the interchange development.

The PIAP is an essential element of the planning and environmental review process. It outlines public involvement and education, establishes a positive relationship with the public, anticipates public reaction, gathers and organizes public input, and meets Federal and State requirements. It documents the public's role in selecting the alternatives and establishing the project purpose and need. The timeline of public involvement and project-related publications is outlined in the Project Flow Chart, which combines all methods of public communication.

To improve public and stakeholder involvement and perceptions of the project prior to the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), the PIAP includes the following components:

- *Project website:* The [Direct Connection project website](#) allows the project team to distribute updates and document links to the public.
- *Stakeholder mailing list:* NJDOT manages and updates a database of stakeholders, local residents, business owners, and Federal and State representatives throughout the planning process.
- *Issues log:* The project team maintains a database of community and stakeholder feedback, derived from the project website, public meetings, comment forms, and other public sources, to ensure that all public responses are documented and addressed.
- *Project newsletters:* The newsletters convey information on technical issues, public meetings, and the alternatives selection process. Typically, they are published every one to two years following agency coordination meetings.
- *Project brochures:* Brochures are distributed at public meetings and in local businesses to provide the public with updates on timeline and cost, answers to frequently asked questions, and project aspects that impact the local community. The format is particularly useful for people who do not have internet access.
- *Public meetings and hearings:* The project team uses public “information center” open houses to communicate project information and answer questions. Meeting notes, questions, and answers are available online.
- *Project partnering sessions:* To ensure that all stakeholders and representatives were involved early in the planning process and to establish working relationships, participants coordinated with regard to technical information, regulatory issues, and project status. The sessions included representatives from NJDOT, local counties and municipalities, DVRPC, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and FHWA.
- *Community Advisory Committee (CAC):* The CAC helped to establish the project purpose and objectives and to develop, evaluate, and disseminate the project alternatives and other information. The Committee included community representatives, business owners, and residents, and it met throughout the project planning process.



[Project Flow Chart](#), outlining the timeline of public involvement and project related publications. (Courtesy of NJDOT)

Streamlining Project Approvals with Public Support

NJDOT developed a streamlining process that allowed the project team to remain on schedule, select the best methods for data collection and review, and move the project through regulatory permitting. NJDOT's early and continuous public involvement efforts figured prominently in more efficient approvals and support during the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) process. Through this outreach, stakeholders learned about project goals and alternatives in advance of the public hearings and comment period. The streamlining process also merged NEPA review with Section 404 permitting, further saving time and money.

During early scoping, NJDOT determined that all of the interchange alternatives would require the purchase of part of a school sports field, used as a public park, which would trigger a Section 4(f) evaluation. NJDOT involved project stakeholders and provided the school superintendent and community members with information on the Section 4(f) evaluation process. After meeting with the superintendent, NJDOT and the Borough of Bellmawr School District agreed that the project would have *de minimis* impacts on the sports field. NJDOT's acquisition of part of the field will help to fund improvements elsewhere in the field.

Background on Sections 4(f) and 404

- [Section 4\(f\)](#): Overview of DOT Act of 1966
- [Section 404](#): Overview of Clean Water Act
- See also [Successes in Stewardship, March 2008 newsletter](#)

Lessons Learned

NJDOT staff received minimal community and stakeholder comments during the public hearings, which they attributed to the proactive public engagement activities. NJDOT staff recognize that the specific stakeholder and community outreach that took place during the Direct Connection process may not be feasible for all projects, but several overarching lessons may be applicable. These are the importance of public education and early stakeholder involvement, which are particularly important for high-cost, high-profile, or controversial projects, and also the benefit from a thorough public outreach in advance of major projects to help keep the project on schedule and within budget.

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Look What's New!

- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) have issued a notice of intent (NOI) to conduct a joint rulemaking to develop more stringent Federal greenhouse-gas-emissions and fuel-economy standards for cars and light trucks built in model years 2017 through 2025. The NOI requests comments on targets for reducing emissions beyond 2016 to 3 to 6 percent per year. For more information, see [EPA's Transportation and Climate Regulations and Standards website](#) and [NHTSA's CAFE –Fuel Economy website](#).
- On September 15, 2010, FHWA submitted the Phase I Report of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) Section 6009 Implementation Study to Congress, the Department of Interior, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The Report presents findings from the first of two study phases. Section 6009 pertains to Section 4(f), which protects publicly owned recreational areas, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and public and private historical sites from use by transportation projects unless the Department of Transportation determines that there is no feasible and prudent avoidance alternative and that all possible planning to minimize harm has occurred. The Phase I Report is available at the [Section 4\(f\) website](#).

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