

A Guide To

Transportation Decisionmaking



U.S. Department
of Transportation

Federal Highway
Administration

Federal Transit
Administration

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A Guide to Transportation Decisionmaking

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Introduction

Have you ever wondered how decisions are made about the transportation projects that affect your life? How do government officials decide where to put a bus stop, road, or bridge? How are these and other transportation projects planned? And how can you make sure your opinions are heard and considered by residents, planners, designers, and elected officials?

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) created this guide to answer these and other transportation project-related questions. We hope this guide will help you understand how transportation decisions are made at the local, State, and national levels; and that you will take advantage of the opportunities provided to contribute your ideas. We believe that the better the public understands the transportation decisionmaking process, the more certain it is that the transportation system will be safe and efficient, and that the planning process will be responsive to public needs and concerns about their communities and the natural environment.

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The Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration are agencies of the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT).

USDOT is the department in the executive branch of the Federal Government that provides guidance, policy, and funding for transportation by air, highways, rail, transit, and water.

How the Decisionmaking Starts

For many of us, transportation projects seem to come from nowhere. Others may vaguely remember a project "promised" years ago. Too often, people develop negative impressions of the process by which transportation projects come into being because of the lack of information on how these decisions are made.

Try comparing the transportation decisionmaking process to the creative process for producing a piece of pottery. The potter begins with a mass of clay and an idea for the final creation. As the mass begins to take shape, the potter makes necessary changes and adjustments by adding some clay here and there. Similarly, you, the public, can participate by shaping the process and adding your ideas to make the creation as beautiful and useful as possible. We at FHWA and FTA look forward to your involvement throughout the transportation-planning process—from the early formative stages in long-range visioning through final, short-range project planning and development activities.

Transportation affects nearly every aspect of a person's life. You can help FHWA and FTA ensure that the U.S. transportation system will remain one of the safest, most efficient, and most environmentally friendly systems in the world! If you have any questions about this guide, please contact FHWA, Office of Planning, at 202-366-0106 or FTA, Office of Planning and Environment, at 202-366-4033.

This *Guide* discusses only the federally required process for transportation decision-making. The Federal role is to provide funds and standards for State and local decisions. States, Metropolitan Planning Organizations, and transit operators make transportation investment decisions. After reading this *Guide*, be sure to investigate the additional State, regional, and local rules and requirements that affect transportation decisions in your local region.

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The Basics of Transportation Decisionmaking

Imagine the various modes of ground transportation: train, car, bicycle, wheelchair, or walking. Now, think about your favorite way to travel. Which would you choose to get to your destination? Are you satisfied with your choices? Will you experience any problems using this method? Would you like more options?

The process of identifying opportunities to improve transportation systems to improve the access and mobility of people and businesses is called transportation planning.

Transportation planners are professionals who study and recommend the best ways to operate and manage the transportation system efficiently both today and in the future to get you to . . .

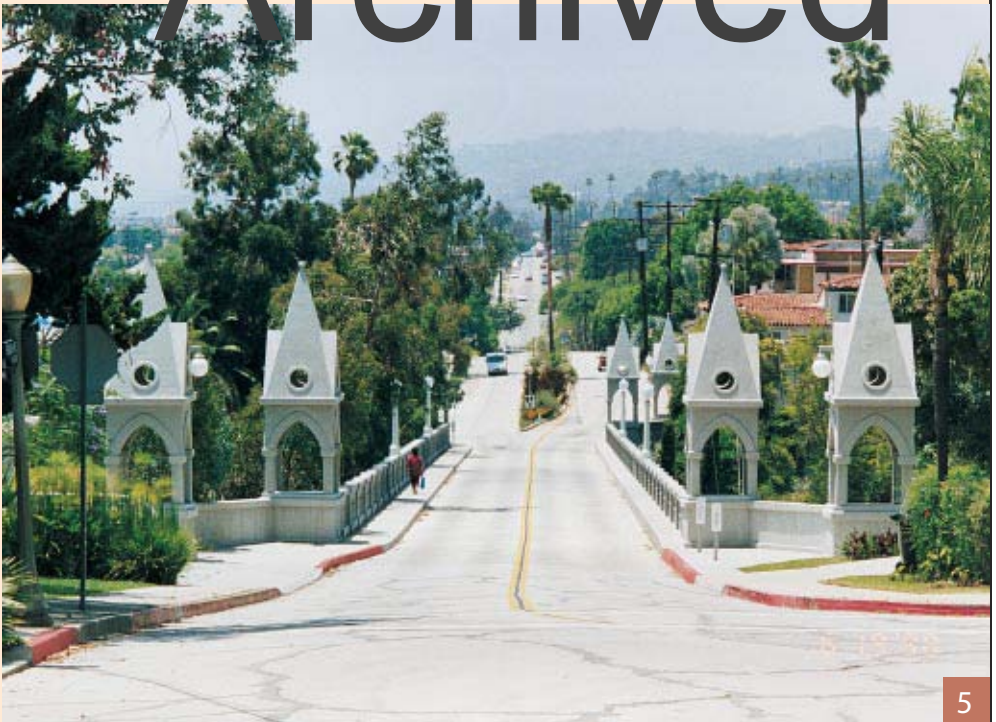
- Your home.
- Your work.
- Your errands.
- Your school.
- Your vacation or anywhere else.



Transportation professionals place a high priority on getting you to and from your destinations safely and efficiently. They are also committed to preserving our communities and neighborhoods, and keeping our air and water clean.

Transportation decisionmaking looks for ways to solve current and anticipated transportation problems while avoiding future problems. Transportation planners think about the system that exists today and the system that will exist 5, 10, and even 20 years from now. To develop the best transportation choices, transportation planners reach out and involve many different organizations, for example those that provide housing, schools, jobs, parks, and care for our environmental resources.

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The Government and Transportation Decisionmaking

Transportation decisionmaking is carried out at several different levels government:

- **State Departments of Transportation (State DOTs)** are the largest units of government that develop transportation plans and projects. They are responsible for setting the transportation goals for the State. To do so, they work with all of the State's transportation organizations and local governments as well as other interested parties. They are responsible for planning safe and efficient transportation between cities and towns in the State and connecting to neighboring States. They have overall responsibility for the safe operation of their State's transportation system.

- **Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs)** are organizations created and designated to carry out the metropolitan transportation-planning process. An MPO may have "council of governments," "regional planning commission," or some similar phrase in its official name. MPOs are as different as the individual metropolitan areas they represent. A policy board, which is comprised of local elected officials, sets the MPO's policy. Other groups, such as nonprofit, community based, and environmental organizations, can influence the direction an MPO follows.

INTERESTED PARTIES

The Federal definition of “interested parties” includes citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, private providers of transportation, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled, and other interested parties. (23 U.S.C. 134 and 135, and 49 U.S.C. 5304)

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- **Local governments** carry out many transportation-planning functions, such as scheduling improvements and maintenance for local streets and roads.
- **Transit agencies** are organizations that provide transportation for the public. Public transportation includes buses, subways, light rail, commuter rail, monorail, passenger ferryboats, trolleys, inclined railways, and people movers.
- **Federal Government, represented by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT)**, oversees the transportation planning and project activities of the MPOs, State DOTs, and transit agencies. The USDOT also provides advice and training on transportation topics, ranging from pavement technology to efficient design and operations of highway and transit systems. The USDOT also supplies critical funding needed for transportation planning and projects. At least every 4 years, the USDOT approves a program of projects submitted by the State DOTs; the program includes all projects proposed for Federal funds, along with any other regionally significant project(s) involving FHWA or FTA, regardless of how it is funded.

Different Transportation Plans and Programs

Before transportation planners start their work, the residents and officials of a region or a State must have a long-term vision for transportation in that area. A vision provides broad goals for what the region or State will look like and reflects what is important for the future.

To develop a vision, consider the characteristics of your region and State, and how you expect those characteristics to change over the next several years. Here are some characteristics to consider:

- Projected population growth.
- Projected economic changes.
- Current and future transportation modes and their unique needs (air, bicycle, bus, rail, roads, pedestrian, and water)
- Safety.
- Maintenance, operations, and management of transportation facilities.
- Preservation of the human and natural environment.
- Freight movement.
- Community livability and quality of life.



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Some transportation plans focus strictly on transportation, while others are broader, with transportation included as just one part of a larger plan for green space, parks, and other land uses. Transportation-planning processes often are complex because they cover entire State and metropolitan transportation systems. A State plan will also include regional, metropolitan, and other local transportation plans.



Once a region or State has reviewed and established goals for its vision, it has also developed a foundation for improvements to that area's transportation system. Long-range plans outline transportation solutions that cover 20 or more years. Solutions might include a new traffic signal system, a pedestrian pathway, a new bus line, or a completely new road project.

Planning

Putting the Plans in Place

Transportation planners help the public and elected officials translate the vision into **Long-Range Transportation Plans (LRTP)**. Planners look at different transportation alternatives and work with the public and other agencies to select those alternatives that make the most sense for an area and best use limited funds. Planners often use sophisticated computer models to predict future travel, help facilitate public discussion, and solicit the opinions of the public.

After regions or States develop their long-range transportation plans, the MPO develops its **Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)**, and the State develops its **Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)**. These short-term improvement programs are



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required to be updated at least once every 4 years. The TIP and STIP both contain individual transportation improvements and projects. All federally funded projects must be part of an improvement program in order to be implemented and receive Federal funds.

The following chart illustrates which organizations tend to use the four types of plans and projects described previously:

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Plan Use by Organization*

Organization	Vision Planning	Long-Range Plans	TIPs	Project Planning
State DOTs	✓	✓	✓	✓
MPOs	✓	✓	✓	
Transit Agencies	✓	✓	✓	✓
City/Local Trans. Dept.			✓	✓

*Plan development is the collective responsibility of the MPO, transit operator and State DOT. Project planning may be done by these and other organizations.

Funding Transportation Projects

Before improvements can be made to your area's transportation system, States and MPOs must identify project funds that will be readily available over the 4-year life of the TIP or STIP and the 20 years of the long-range transportation plan. Just as people budget funds for short- and long-term family and home expenses, MPOs and States plan funding for specific transportation projects. Since TIPs and STIPs describe the funds needed to make these transportation improvements possible, these programs must include reasonable cost estimates and be within their anticipated budget.

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Communities and the Environment in Transportation Planning

Transportation planning must reflect the desires of communities, and take into account the impacts on both the natural and human environments. Moreover, transportation plans and programs should help regions and communities reach their goals. As previously mentioned, a project must be included in a TIP or STIP in order to receive Federal funds. In addition, in air quality nonattainment and maintenance areas, the Clean Air Act requires that transportation plans and programs must be consistent with the State's clean air goals.

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Your Role in the Planning Process

So how do you fit into the transportation-planning process? Your role in the process is very important. Without your input—your ideas—State and local governments cannot develop a full understanding of your community's needs.

Although some people may think that transportation officials can gather all necessary information on their own, that is not actually the case. You may know information that is more current or detailed than is available to transportation professionals. You may also see things in a different way than transportation officials. This is why it is so important for you to be involved.

The transportation-planning process is ongoing, so there are several ways to make transportation planners aware of your needs and concerns, and to help develop transportation solutions. To make sure that you are following the latest developments, you can:

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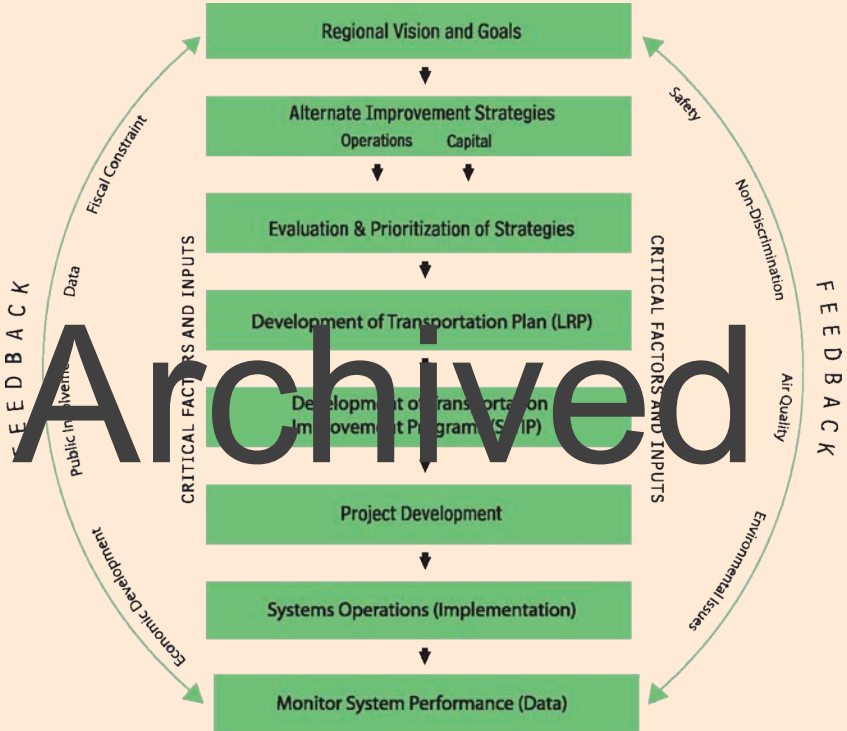


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- **Put your name on a mailing list** to receive newsletters, updates, and other information from your MPO(s) and State DOT(s).
- **Attend meetings** of State and regional transportation boards.
- **Provide your input** on transportation plans and programs.
- **Volunteer to serve** on a focus group or advisory committee.
- **Ask a transportation official** to attend a meeting of your Rotary Club, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, American Association of Retired Persons, Kiwanis Club, school board, or other community or civic organization and ask that official to explain the transportation-planning process to you and your neighbors.
- **Find out** what specific public-participation opportunities are available in your area by contacting your MPO, State DOT, transit agency, and local government agency.

Remember that vision plans, long-range transportation plans, and transportation improvement programs are the key documents produced during the transportation-planning process.

Transportation Planning Process



These documents build the foundation for individual transportation projects. They are all part of the big transportation picture and are important to your transportation future. Get involved!

Project Development

After transportation planning is **project development**, which is also known as the **project-planning process, the environmental process, or the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process**. Project development occurs on individual projects, ranging in size from small (e.g., new lane striping) to very large (e.g., a new transit or highway project). Whether small or large, projects follow the transportation-planning process. In other words, projects must appear in the TIP and/or STIP; the public must have an opportunity to review and comment on projects; and projects must be approved by transportation officials. The project-development process is critical because it links the planning process with the actual project location, design, and eventual construction and operation.

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Goals of Project Development and the NEPA Process

The goals of the project-development process are to decide where a project will be located, what it will look like, and how it will function.

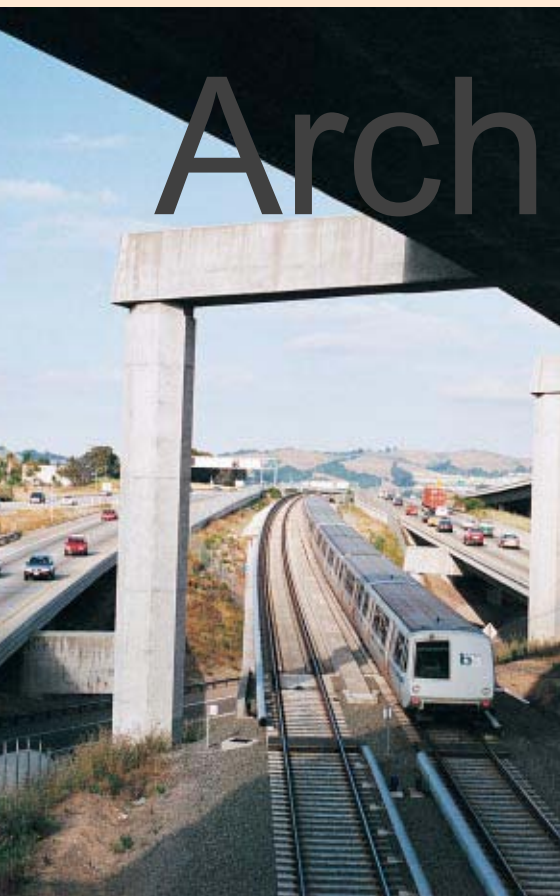
Projects that advance through a transportation-planning process will eventually be subjected to even more refined examination to determine how they might impact the community, particularly the natural environment as well as public health and welfare. Before any project can move forward to the construction phase, FHWA and FTA may address and assess compliance with more than 40 laws related to safety and the environment. These laws cover social, economic, and environmental (SEE) concerns ranging from community cohesion to the impact on threatened and endangered species. In order to successfully complete this detailed process, FHWA and FTA use the NEPA process to evaluate the SEE concerns with each individual project.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 requires that any activity or project receiving Federal funding or other Federal approvals (including transportation projects) undergo a detailed analysis of potential impacts. Under NEPA, FHWA and FTA work closely with other Federal agencies and State, local, and Tribal governments; public and private organizations; and the public to understand the potential impacts of a project. This process requires stakeholders to strike a delicate balance between many important factors; including, mobility needs, economic prosperity, health and environmental protection, community and neighborhood preservation, and quality of life for present and future generations.

Documenting Decisions

It is important for government officials to carefully evaluate the choices available to them when making transportation decisions. Local governments and State DOTs are required to document their transportation funding decisions. This allows the public to base their input on current and accurate materials provided by the MPO or State DOT. Documents are prepared before and after decisions are made, which allows everyone to see why decisions were made and to provide additional input.

In addition to the documentation just mentioned, FHWA and FTA also prepare official documents to meet NEPA and other legal requirements. Since every transportation project is different, and some are more complex than others, FHWA and FTA prepare one or more of the following documents for each proposed project in conformance with NEPA requirements:

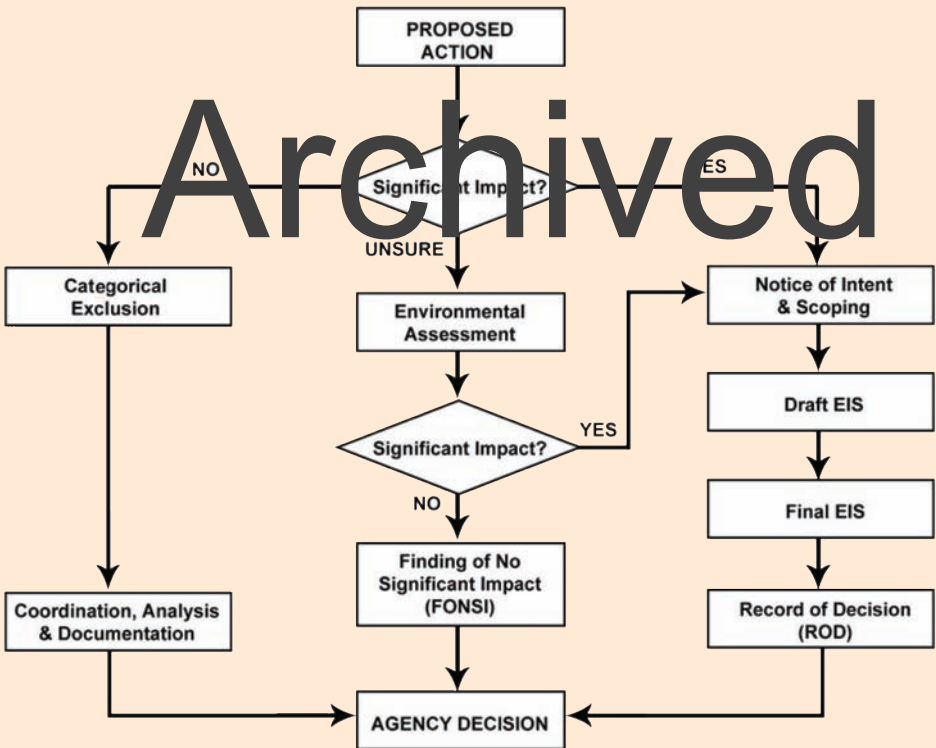


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- **Categorical Exclusions (CEs)** are prepared for Federal actions that have been determined to not have a significant human and/or natural environmental effect.
 - **Environmental Assessments (EAs)** are prepared for Federal actions where it is not clearly known how significant the environmental impact might be. If, after preparing an EA, it is determined that the project's impact is significant, an Environmental Impact Statement is then prepared. If the project's impact is determined to be insignificant, a "finding of no significant impact" (FONSI) is documented.
 - **Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)** is a statement indicating that a project was found to have no significant impact on the quality of the human and natural environment and that an environmental statement will, therefore, not be prepared.
 - **Environmental Impact Statements (EISs)** are prepared for Federal actions that have a significant effect on the human and/or natural environment.
 - **Draft EIS (DEIS)** and **Final EIS (FEIS)** are disclosure documents that provide a full description of the proposed project, the existing environment, and analysis of the anticipated beneficial and adverse environmental effects of all reasonable alternatives.
 - **Record of Decision (ROD)** is a concise decision document for an environmental impact statement that states the decision (selected alternative or choice), other alternatives considered, and mitigation adopted for the selected alternative or choice.

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In preparing an EIS, CE, or EA for projects, FHWA and FTA must consider all relevant SEE impacts; provide opportunity for public involvement and input; and work with other Federal, State, Tribal, and local agencies to consider their interests as well.

Although the size and complexity of the three levels of NEPA documentation are different, they all serve the same purpose--to achieve better decisions by making the impact of choices known; and by involving you, the public, in making community-sensitive transportation decisions.



Your Role in Project Development

Your participation in each step of the transportation-planning process is key to identifying good solutions. You can also play an important role in project development by sharing your perspective on the history, issues, and priorities of your local area. It is critical to express your views and ideas about proposed transportation solutions during the planning and project-development stages. The agency will consider your input along with that of other individuals, groups, and agencies to make project decisions that are in the best overall public interest while meeting all applicable laws and regulations.

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Remember, project development is about finding a location and developing a design for how the project will look and work. Perhaps you can recommend ways to avoid, lessen, or compensate for an impact. We call this **mitigation**. Or, you may be able to recommend some special or additional features that may benefit your community. These are called **enhancements**. Mitigation and enhancement are discussed during the planning and project-development phases.

Just as with the transportation-planning process, you should put your name on the project mailing list, attend project public meetings, and invite transportation officials to your community meetings. During this phase, an **advisory committee** may be formed to give the community direct access to project staff and input into the process. On large projects, you can expect the sponsoring agency to hold public hearings, meetings, and/or workshops in the project area.

In order to have the greatest impact on the development of transportation solutions, get involved early. Your input, whether verbal or written, can help shape your community's quality of life.

You can help your planning organization and State DOT develop methods to gather and incorporate community input. If you have ideas about better ways to reach community groups, contact your MPO and/or State DOT.

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You Can Make a Difference

Your participation is essential to the transportation-decisionmaking process. The earlier you get involved, the greater your influence will be.

We want you and your family to get to and from work, school, and play as safely and efficiently as possible. Please, help us to serve you better.

You can go to this website to find contact information for your local MPC:
www.planning.dot.gov/overview.asp.

Thank you!

To find out where you can get involved, contact your FHWA and FTA office, local transportation planning organization, or State DOT.

VISIT OUR WEBSITES

Planning

FHWA <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/>

FTA http://www.fta.dot.gov/planning_environment.htm

NEPA

FHWA <http://environment.fhwa.dot.gov/index.asp>

FTA http://www.fta.dot.gov/planning/planning_environment_5222.html

Public Involvement

FHWA <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/pubinv2.htm>

FTA http://www.fta.dot.gov/planning/environment/planning_environment_226.html

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Glossary

Advisory Committee—a group of representative stakeholders who meet regularly to discuss issues of common concern, such as transportation, and to advise sponsoring-agency officials. These groups effectively interact between residents and their government. Advisory committees are usually housed within MPOs and State DOTs.

Categorical Exclusion (CE)—a document prepared for Federal actions that do not individually or cumulatively have a significant human and/or natural environmental impact. This Categorical Exclusion requires neither an Environmental Assessment nor an Environmental Impact Statement.

Enhancements—activities that assist communities in reaching social, cultural, aesthetic, and/or environmental goals, and harmonizing the transportation system with the community. Enhancements make projects fit better into the community and can include context-sensitive solutions, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, streetscape renovations, scenic beautification, historic preservation related to transportation, and wetland and wildlife protection.

Environmental Assessment (EA)—an interim decision document prepared when the significance of social, economic, or environmental impact has not yet been clearly established. If the action is determined to have significant impact, an Environmental Impact Statement is then prepared. If no significant impact is determined, a FONSI is prepared.

Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)—a document, required under the National Environmental Policy Act, prepared for an action that is likely to have significant impact. This document summarizes the major environmental impacts, outlines issues, examines reasonable alternatives, and arrives at a record of decision, identifying the selected alternative for the project.

Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)—an agency of the United States Department of Transportation. FHWA administers the Federal-aid Highway Program, which provides financial assistance to States to construct and improve highways, urban and rural roads, and bridges. FHWA also administers the Federal Lands Highway Program, which provides access to and within national forests, national parks, Indian Tribal lands, and other public lands. FHWA is headquartered in Washington, DC, with field offices across the country, including one in or near each State capital.

Federal Surface Transportation Legislation—Federal laws that authorize funds and programs for highway, transit, and other surface transportation programs. These funds historically have been derived primarily through the gas tax you pay at the pump.

Federal Transit Administration (FTA)—an agency of the United States Department of Transportation. FTA is the principal source of Federal financial assistance to America's communities for the planning, development, and improvement of public or mass transportation systems. FTA provides leadership, technical assistance, and financial resources for safe, technologically advanced public transportation that enhances mobility and accessibility, improves the nation's communities and natural environment, and strengthens the national economy. FTA is headquartered in Washington, DC, with regional offices in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Kansas City, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Seattle.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)—a statement indicating that a project was found to have no significant impacts on the quality of the human and natural environment and that, therefore, no environmental statement will be prepared.

Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)—a document resulting from a regional or Statewide process of collaboration and consensus regarding a region or State's transportation system. This document serves as the defining vision for the region's or State's transportation systems and services. In metropolitan areas, the plan covers all of the transportation improvements scheduled for funding over the next 20 years.

Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)—a forum for regional planning, collaboration, and decision making in metropolitan areas of at least 50,000 in population. MPOs conduct the regional transportation planning process.

Mitigation—a means of avoiding, minimizing, rectifying, or reducing an impact, and, in some cases, compensating for an impact.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)—a law enacted in 1969 that established a national environmental policy. For any project using Federal funding or requiring Federal approval, including transportation projects, NEPA requires the examination of the environmental effects of the proposed project and alternatives, and to complete this process before a Federal decision is made.

Project Development—the phase a proposed project undergoes once it has been through the planning process. The project-development phase is a more detailed analysis of a proposed project's social, economic, and environmental impacts and various project alternatives. During this phase, all affected parties, including the public, reach a decision through negotiation. After a proposal has successfully passed the project-development phase, it may move to preliminary engineering, design, and construction.

Public Hearing—a formal event held prior to a decision for the purpose of gathering community comments and positions from all interested parties. Comments are entered into public record and, as appropriate, incorporated into decisions.

Public Meeting—a formal or informal event designed for a specific issue or community group during which planners present information and receive input from community residents.

Record of Decision (ROD)—a concise decision document for an environmental impact statement that states the decision (i.e., selected choice or alternative), other alternatives considered, and mitigation adopted for the selected choice or alternative.

State Department of Transportation (State DOT)—a Statewide agency that is responsible for conducting transportation planning activities in non-metropolitan areas of the State, and assisting MPOs in transportation planning for the metropolitan areas. State DOTs are also responsible for developing, designing, and constructing most projects on major highways in their States.

Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)—prepared by the State DOTs, the STIP is a staged, multiyear listing of projects proposed for Federal, State, and local funding, encompassing the entire State. It is a compilation of the TIPs (see TIP) prepared for the metropolitan areas as well as project information for the non-metropolitan/rural areas of the State and for transportation between cities.

Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)—a staged, multiyear (typically 4 year) listing of surface transportation projects proposed for Federal, State, and local funding within a metropolitan area. MPOs are required to prepare a TIP as a short-range programming document to complement the long-range transportation plan.

Transportation planning—a collaborative process of examining demographic characteristics and travel patterns for a given area. This process examines how these characteristics will change over a given period of time, and evaluates alternatives for the area's transportation system as well as the most effective use of local, State, and Federal transportation funding. Long-range planning is typically done over a period of 20 years; short-range programming of specific projects usually covers a period of 4 years.

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An aerial photograph of a city park area. On the left, a river flows past a concrete dam. A multi-lane highway runs parallel to the river. In the center, a large green park features two circular landscaped areas with trees and walkways. To the right, several large brick buildings and parking lots are visible. The word "Archived" is overlaid in large black text across the center of the image.

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