

EPA/FHWA/Caltrans Partnership Effort

2001 Environmental Excellence Awards Nomination for Excellence in Environmental Leadership

Summary: The U.S. EPA Region 9, California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and the FHWA California Division have participated in a partnership effort for over a year to develop ways to: improve communication; make quality and timely decisions in the transportation planning and environmental processes; and to further extend partnering relationships. This nomination is to recognize these nine individuals, representing three distinctly different organizations, and nine different functional areas, who came together to develop, refine, and recommend to each agency's management a joint plan of action that would enable their parent agencies to foster the development of positive interagency communication and to create a framework for an improved working relationship. This partnership team developed recommendations that stressed the importance of early coordination, cooperation and an effective environmental process. The emphasis on environmental concerns, multi-agency participation in program level planning and increased flexibility of funding, will provide the opportunity to resolve many issues before costly project development begins.

Background: EPA, Caltrans, and FHWA interact on a variety of issues during the normal course of transportation planning and project development and permitting processes. While these interactions can run smoothly, more typically the agencies clash on how environmental considerations and legal mandates should be carried out. The result is unacceptable project delay as well as conflicts between agency personnel. The agencies felt that a healthier relationship based on mutual understanding of agency missions, legal mandates, and authorities, and an understanding of why conflicts develop, would lead to solutions which would result in a more effective project delivery process. On April 2, 1999, the three agencies held a facilitated workshop at the University of California, Davis. Over 50 representatives from FHWA, EPA, and Caltrans, participated in the workshop and discussed common goals, expectations and challenges each agency faces during the transportation planning and environmental processes. After opening remarks by Agency management, breakout groups were used to look at "Communication," "Policy," and "Knowledge and Information" issues. The workshop concluded with the identification of a set of tentative recommendations. To ensure that the momentum of the workshop continued, the management from each agency agreed to appoint three staff to participate on a facilitated work group to evaluate, prioritize and recommend appropriate solutions to the issues and concerns that were identified during the workshop's breakout sessions, taking into consideration the list of tentative recommendations summarized at the end of the workshop. This partnership work group became known as the "Group of Nine." Each member of the partnership represented a different functional area of their parent organization. EPA had representatives from their Air, Water, and Cross-Media divisions; FHWA's members came from environmental, engineering, and legal backgrounds; and Caltrans' representatives were from their environment, transportation planning, and district project delivery sections.

The "Group of Nine" each recognized that their individual agency mission statements conflicted with one another but felt that there was a common objective from which to build this partnership. During the first meeting of the work group, the Partnership Objective became: "Each agency understands and appreciates the importance and need for a safe and efficient intermodal transportation system and the protection and enhancement of the natural and human environment."

Following the workshop, the "Group of Nine" met five times over the course of three months, in an off-site facilitated setting to further explore agency missions, programs, policies and regulations and to develop a set of joint recommendations. The group developed a charter to guide the process which included methods of voting and rules of conduct. All agencies faithfully adhered to the charter during the course of the meetings. Assignments were given to each team member to conduct research on specific topics that would be presented at a subsequent meeting. The team worked towards identifying possible solutions to the identified issues. The voting process determined the final outcome of recommendations that were then delivered to Management at a formal presentation that was held in November 1999. The three Executives approved the recommendations and asked the team to reconvene and develop an implementation plan with performance measures. The "Group of Nine" met two more times to refine the implementation plan, to establish goals and membership of the NEPA/404 MOU Workgroup and the MPO Pilot Project Workgroup, and to develop a document that would summarize the last nine months activities that would be signed at the first Executive Management meeting. During these two follow-on meetings, other experts and stakeholders were brought into the process to discuss the specifics of the implementation plan and formation of the new work groups. The first meeting of the Steering Committee occurred in March 2000 and the Implementation Plan was adopted. The Partnership Agreement was signed by the three Agency Principals at the first Executive Meeting held on July 14, 2000.

EPA/FHWA/Caltrans Partnership Effort

~~2000 Regional and Federal Agency Partnership Initiative by California, EPA, and the Metropolitan Leadership~~

The Results: The implementation plan serves as the Partnership's action plan. It identifies specific initiatives to be accomplished over the course of the next year. Each initiative has a performance measure and time line for completion. A Steering Committee, comprised of one middle management representative from each agency is responsible for reporting and tracking the status of the initiatives, setting priorities, and establishing quality action teams. The Partnership Initiatives are as follows:

Management Meetings - The Partnership Principals and middle managers are meeting quarterly to track and report on the status of the initiatives and to discuss emerging problems, issues, opportunities and agency priorities. This has resulted in seeing each other as human beings and not just as an agency name; as well as provides opportunities to gain a better understanding of each agency's mandates and challenges.

Training and Outreach - Each agency has shared internal and external training opportunities thereby identifying cross-training opportunities. A long term training plan will be developed and approved by October 1, 2000. Five joint workshops for stakeholders were conducted statewide on air quality conformity; thereby eliminating duplicative efforts for the agencies and providing better service to the stakeholders.

Rotational Assignments - One assignment per agency per fiscal year will be in place by December 1, 2000. FHWA to EPA; Caltrans to EPA; EPA to Caltrans and EPA to FHWA. These assignments will give the assignee an on-the-job experience; thereby providing an understanding of that agency's mission and mandate and ultimately help attain each agency's mutual goals.

Funding Coordination - The Steering Committee has identified several funding opportunities. Two applications have been submitted for State Planning and Research Program (SPR) funds; these are the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Pilot Project (described below) and an Environmental Summit planned for the Summer of 2001. In addition, 20 resource agency positions are expected to be funded under the TEA-21 Section 1309 provision, of which EPA Region 9 will be the recipient of two of these positions. The Resource Partnering MOUs and the MPO Pilot Project have been selected as two of AASHTO's Streamlining Pilot Projects.

NEPA/404 Integration - The Monitoring Group convened in January 2000. Data collection and analysis is currently in progress. A meeting of all the signatories of the current NEPA/404 MOU will be held in August 2000 to begin the re-evaluation of the current process and to identify the next steps to revise the MOU. By September 2000, interim "triggers" to invoke the MOU will be established.

Guidance Development - The agencies are working together (or worked together) to coordinate timely input on the following guidance: Regional Transportation Planning Guidance, completed December 1999; the Standard Environmental Reference, Phase II expected completion, Fall of 2000, and Phase III expected completion, Winter of 2000. The agencies will be working together in fiscal 2001 on Cumulative Impact Analysis Best Practices and developing a Water Quality Strategy.

Metropolitan Planning Organization Pilot Project (a.k.a. "Partnership for Integrated Planning, Merced County: A Model Approach") - The purpose of the pilot is to develop a model process for integrating land use, transportation and environmental planning. To date the agency workgroup members have worked with the Merced County Association of Governments to develop a work plan and budget proposal, contacted stakeholders and analyzed technical tools. In fiscal 2001, Phase II will include a kick-off meeting; periodic stakeholder meetings, technical and public involvement workgroups and scenario analysis. If this pilot project is successful, it will bring environmental regulatory review, agreement and approval earlier into the regional transportation planning process instead of the more traditional project development stage; thereby serving as a model to integrate land use, environment and transportation planning efforts.

Achieving the performance measures established by the "Group of Nine," will result in improved interagency cooperation toward achievement of their respective mutual goal of providing a safe and efficient intermodal transportation system and the protection and enhancement of the natural and human environment.