



Federal Highway
Administration

FHWA Accelerating Project Delivery

Strategy: Planning & Environment Linkages

Maryland Peer Exchange

December 12-13, 2017 | Hanover, MD



This activity report summarizes the presentations and discussions. The summaries follow the order of appearance on the agenda. Each presentation summary is one page long, has a brief overview, findings, highlights from the participant discussion, and has a text box containing the speaker's contact information. This peer exchange was funded through the Second Strategic Highway Research Program (SHRP2) product [Expediting Project Delivery \(C19\)](#).

Peer Exchange Notes

The peer exchange focused on discussing Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) approaches and identifying recommendations and action items for Maryland's State Highway Administration (SHA) to more formally implement PEL approaches in project development and delivery. Fifty-one participants from MDOT SHA, resource agencies, local agencies, and FHWA headquarters and division offices attended the peer exchange. Colorado DOT and North Carolina DOT served as the peers for this peer exchange and shared their experiences with PEL to guide MDOT SHA in thinking about how to implement PEL in Maryland.

Key Themes Participants shared information on PEL approaches and identified how PEL approaches could be applied effectively in Maryland.

Products Participants identified five key themes related to implementing PEL in Maryland. These five themes were then used to identify issues and opportunities for PEL in Maryland, which then led to the development of key action items.

Next Steps Detailed action items were identified as a part of break out session #2, held on day two of the peer exchange. These action items are detailed in the break out session #2 summary at the end of this document. Each action item was assigned to a specific group or groups and was tied to an identified issue and opportunity.

For More Information

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Resources

[FHWA Planning & Environment Linkages](#)
[FHWA Expediting Project Delivery](#)
[CDOT PEL Program](#)
[NCDOT Integration](#)

Presentations referenced in this document are available upon request to Madison.Burke@dot.gov.

What is PEL?

Contact

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Organization

FHWA Office of Planning

Presentation Summary

Provided an overview of what PEL is, how PEL can accelerate project delivery, background information on PEL, the benefits of PEL, and regulatory information on PEL approaches

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Presentation Highlights

- PEL uses the information, analysis, or products developed during planning to inform the environmental review process.
- PEL is authorized under multiple statutory authorities, the most recent authorities being:
 - [23 USC 168](#) outlines conditions for adopting or incorporating by reference a planning product.
 - [23 USC 139\(f\)\(4\)](#) describes requirements for eliminating alternatives if studied in planning.
- Many conditions for PEL are already completed as part of the normal transportation planning process.
- FHWA provides many resources to support States using PEL, including a [PEL Question and Answer](#) and the [PEL questionnaire](#).

Participant Discussion Highlights

Public Involvement

Under PEL, the lead agency or project sponsor is responsible for public involvement, as applicable. Transparency in the process is important.

NEPA vs. PEL

PEL allows planning decisions, such as purpose and need and the elimination of unreasonable alternatives, to be made before beginning NEPA, if statutory conditions are met. PEL processes are not included in the NEPA time allotment. Planning funds become ineligible during NEPA.

MDOT SHA:

Planning and Environmental Processes and Tools

Contact

Barry Kiedrowski

Organization

Maryland State Highway Administration

Presentation Summary

Provided an overview of existing MDOT SHA environmental processes and prior PEL-like initiatives in Maryland. Presented on tools MDOT SHA currently uses in its planning processes.

Phone

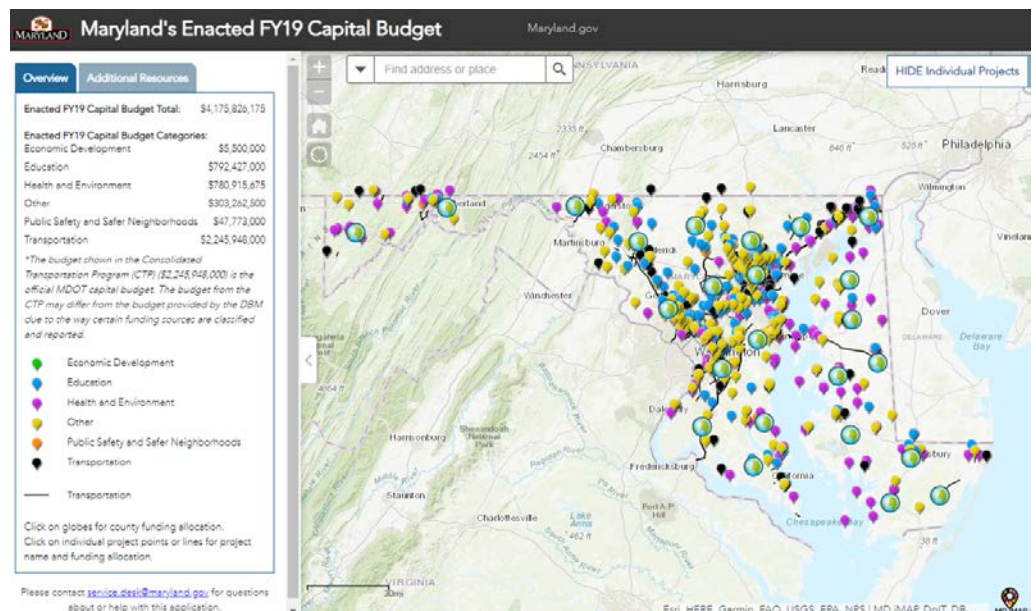
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Presentation Highlights

- MDOT uses the Transportation Environmental Regulatory Process (TERP) to increase inter-agency coordination.
- MDOT uses the Model of Sustainability and Integrated Corridors (MOSAIC) tool to kick-start planning processes and quickly identify potential environmental issues.
- MDOT has completed three prior PEL-like efforts:
 - A PEL study to identify potential transportation improvements for US 219 from I-68 to the Pennsylvania state line.
 - A corridor planning study for MD 223.
 - A feasibility study for US 50.
- MDOT uses [iMap](#), a GIS tool, to make data publicly available and to expedite the initial planning process.



Source: MDOT SHA

CDOT PEL Study Framework & Resources

Contact

Sean Brewer

Organization

Colorado Department of Transportation

Presentation Summary

CDOT leads a PEL program that focuses on larger-scale PEL studies. CDOT has completed 20 PEL studies since 2008. Through PEL, CDOT engages resource agencies and has found success with its Transportation Environmental Resource Council (TERC).

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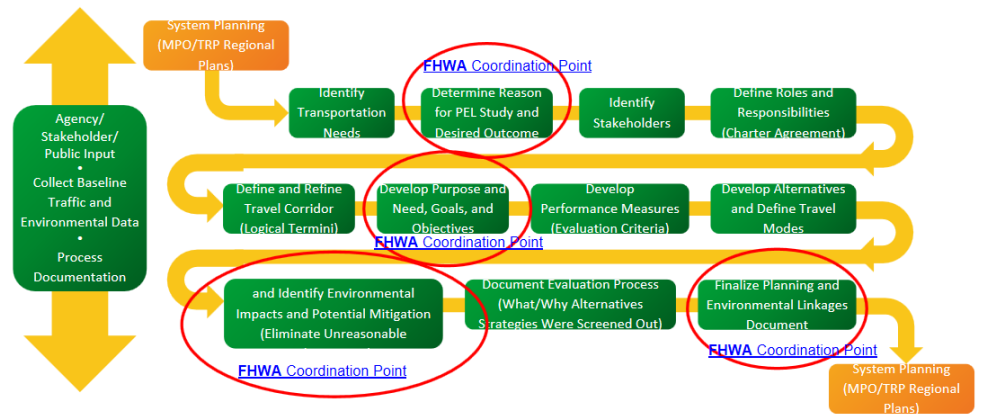
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Presentation Highlights

- CDOT’s PEL program focuses on fostering agency outreach, environmental scoping, and mitigation opportunities.
- The PEL process is flexible and can be used to make project or planning decisions.
- If a program or project is likely to have federal involvement in the future, PEL is a good tool to help streamline future NEPA processes.
- CDOT data from PEL studies can be used in NEPA if less than 5 years old.



PEL Process Flowchart



Source: CDOT

Participant Discussion Highlights

PEL Benefits

CDOT has benefited from accelerated timelines and less required documentation on its PEL studies.

When to Use PEL

PEL is beneficial when projects would benefit from additional planning analysis prior to beginning NEPA.

Panel Discussion

Contact

Alena Cook

Organization

North Carolina Department of Transportation

Presentation Summary

NCDOT uses a planning process called Integration, which links its long range planning and project development processes. Integration has improved efficiency and reduced redundancies in the planning process since being implemented in 2005.

Phone

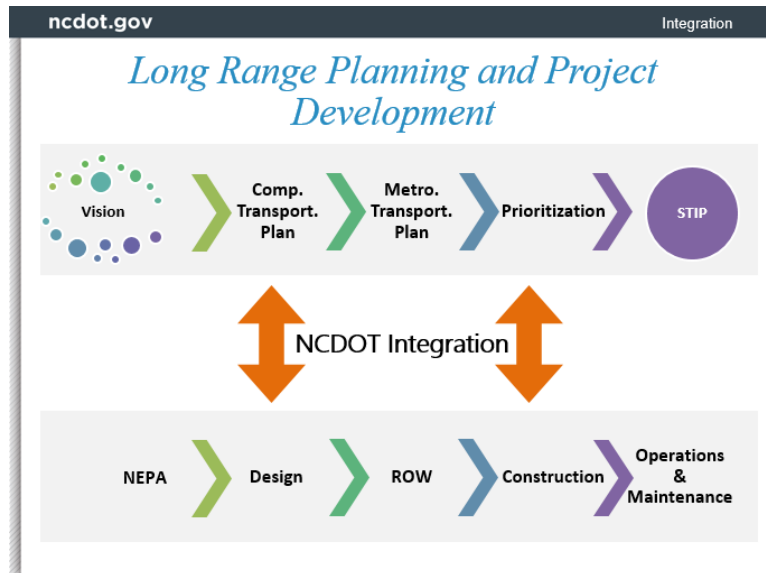
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Presentation Highlights

- NCDOT uses a planning process called Integration to link its long range planning and project development processes.
- To increase inter-agency coordination, NCDOT implemented an Integration Implementation Team to provide a forum for long-range planners, NEPA practitioners, and other stakeholders to work together in the Integration process.
- NCDOT found that Integration improved efficiencies and reduced redundancies in the planning process.



Source: NCDOT

Participant Discussion Highlights

Organizational Structure

NCDOT uses a decentralized organizational structure where different divisions handle various requirements, but all divisions coordinate closely to ensure consistency.

Public Reaction

NCDOT has found that transparency and consistent language has been helpful to their Integration efforts with the public.

Break Out Session #1

Summary

The break out included five tables organized around one of five key themes identified for the peer exchange. Each table came up with a list of issues and opportunities for their theme.

Discussion Highlights

Each theme of the discussion is listed below, with identified issues and opportunities listed below.

Statewide Data Management and Use

- Impacts and flexibility of PEL on agencies; comfort with pre-NEPA involvement
- Comfort level of resource agencies in using PEL data vs. NEPA data
- Appropriate level of data for PEL planning vs. NEPA? How often and in what way does pre-NEPA data need to be validated? How does the 5-year rule apply to PEL products?
- Harnessing existing and emerging tools and increasing knowledge of and access to tools, to facilitate PEL (MOSAIC, ArcGIS online, etc.)

Public Involvement and Communication

- Communicating difference from NEPA and managing expectations of local municipalities and elected officials concerning the benefits of a PEL approach
- Ensuring high-quality communication materials in lower-cost PEL studies
- Emphasizing use of modern communication channels like social media
- Clarify expectations for level of public involvement
- Articulating benefits (cost/time savings, other benefits) of PEL
- Selling points for public interest and regulatory/resource agencies' participation in PEL

Stakeholder Involvement and Partnerships

- Comfort level of resource agencies in using PEL data vs. NEPA data
- Roles of MPOs/RPOs in contributing to PEL?
- What is the potential for planning organizations to play a role in expanding the PEL approach/PEL planning product development?

Planning and Environment Approach Timelines

- Risk of data shelf-life from planning/PEL activities remaining eligible for use in NEPA
- What other forms of input are appropriate to initiate a PEL study?
- Use state programming processes to identify statewide priorities through involvement of local governments
- Map planning/project development process; how to best use products from planning

PEL Products and Technical NEPA Issues

- Clarifying mechanisms in PEL that help ensure planning products are eligible for use in NEPA.
- Shelf life of PEL products
- Clarifying mechanisms for incorporating/adopting PEL planning products by reference
- Documentation to mitigate PEL product development risk of class of action

Break Out Session #2

Summary

Participants identified issues, opportunities, responsible parties, and next step actions for each theme.

Discussion Highlights

For each identified theme, participants in this break out session identified the issue, opportunity, the responsible party, and next step actions to move forward with PEL in Maryland.

Statewide Data Management and Use

- **Issue:** Uneven data quality across national, state, regional and local owners, and within different overlapping datasets
- **Opportunity:** Use the PEL process to identify: 1) possible data, and 2) relevant data, and assess federal, state, regional, local unevenness
- **Who:** State-led group of data owners
- **Actions:**
 - Develop a matrix of maximum data that is informative (to transportation projects and environmental resources)
 - Define owners and level of analysis, data expiration date, data generation date.
 - Design a process to mechanize (as much as possible) data collection, tracking, publishing, and updating

Public Involvement and Communication

- **Issue:** Do a better job of communicating about PEL (recognize PEL could be a new concept for public, even if PEL products are already known through existing planning or NEPA processes)
- **Opportunity:**
 - Identify existing suite of public involvement and communication tools from NEPA outreach. Modify to increase ease of use and engagement of public; includes education of public about the PEL approach (in addition to project content)
 - Step up interaction/collaboration with MPOs in engaging their constituents
 - Develop an MDOT PEL communications plan
- **Who:**
 - MDOT SHA project teams must understand and embrace PEL
 - MDOT Office of Communications (top down media dissemination/social media)
 - Project-based public outreach support teams
 - IT support
 - Senior Managers – bringing elected officials along in adoption of the PEL approach and its benefits
 - Audiences include the general public; but all stakeholders as well
- **Actions:**
 - Initial conversation with MPOs and State for cooperation
 - Think through communications plan to guide efforts
 - Coordinate internally for SHA – internal management and elected officials
 - Explore suite of modern communication tools: visualization, social media

Break Out Session #2

Summary

Participants identified issues, opportunities, responsible parties, and next step actions for each theme.

Stakeholder Involvement and Partnerships

- **Issue:** Varying capacity, sophistication, size, and context of MPOs and RPOs
- **Opportunity:** Strengthen and support MPOs' capacity to lead the PEL approach
- **Who:**
 - MPO's host/lead if they are larger/more sophisticated
 - State/SHA liaisons assist for smaller/less sophisticated MPOs/RPOs
- **Actions:**
 - Develop a matrix of maximum data that is informative (to transportation projects and environmental resources)
 - Define owners and level of analysis, data expiration date, data generation date
 - Design a process to mechanize (as much as possible) data collection, tracking, publishing, and updating

Planning and Environment Approach Timelines

- **Issue:** When to use PEL (and when not to use PEL)?
- **Opportunity:** Clarify different types of studies/PEL approach to consistently identify when to use PEL and when NOT to
- **Who:**
 - SHA Office of Planning
 - Districts within Office of Traffic and Safety
 - Transportation Business Units (units within MDOT)
- **Actions:**
 - Categorize study types
 - Interview internal stakeholders
 - Create briefing to document findings including typical study types/outcomes (e.g. decision tree)

PEL Products and Technical NEPA Issues

- **Issue:** Lack of statewide understanding of what constitutes "PEL"
- **Opportunity:**
 - Work with Modes/MPOs to define a "guidebook" defining PEL and the PEL approach
 - Focus on multimodal projects
 - Plan for guidebook updates to adapt/adopt new technologies into processes; and to incorporate changing priorities at the local, state, or federal levels
- **Who:** MDOT SHA Planning leading a team of modes/MPOs
- **Actions:**
 - Identify funding
 - Secure management buy-in
 - Form guidebook management team
 - Produce draft and final guidebook