

**ENVIRONMENTAL EXCELLENCE AWARD: ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP  
NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION'S  
ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVE**

Historically, transportation agencies have progressed their capital programs in a way that ensures strict regulatory compliance. However, they have seldom gone beyond compliance. Though this reactive approach served to reduce unnecessary environmental damage, it did little to improve the environment.

NYSDOT believes that it is the responsibility of all state agencies, not just that of the environmental agencies, to protect the environmental resources within the state. As New York's largest public works agency, NYSDOT recognizes its potential and opportunity to proactively advance the State environmental program. NYSDOT has affirmed its obligation and responsibility to the people of New York to protect, improve and enhance the environment as opportunities arise, especially when this can be done for little or no additional cost.

To address this obligation, NYSDOT developed an Environmental Initiative in the spring of 1998. Through proactive actions, NYSDOT has become an important part of New York State's environmental solution and has changed its working relationships with environmental agencies and groups. As these agencies and groups have become partners, permit approval times have improved, mitigation costs have declined, morale has improved and cost-effective environmental benefits are being realized.

NYSDOT's Environmental Initiative has five major objectives:

- Promote and strengthen an environmental ethic throughout the Department.
- Advance State environmental policies and objectives with NYSDOT resources.
- Partner with others to construct environmental enhancements.
- Pilot new environmental protection and enhancement methods.
- Strengthen relationships with environmental agencies, organizations and local municipalities.

To further these objectives, NYSDOT is now doing environmental work in support of its corporate environmental ethic using existing state and federal funds. This provides real environmental protection and enhancement, while advancing a shift in attitudes within NYSDOT and providing a basis for more positive interaction with external partners. Environmental Initiative projects are routinely included into the Capital Program. Examples are diverse and numerous, including providing fishing access sites, fish ladders, peregrine falcon nesting platforms, scenic overlooks, wetland improvements, shoreline protection, multi-use recreation trails, tire shred embankment demonstration project, stormwater treatment pilot studies, herbicides alternative program, ozone alert day initiatives, and many others.

A major premise of the Environmental Initiative is that partnerships work better than contention. NYSDOT has joined with environmental agencies in a common purpose to advance State environmental programs. The effort is paying off. With the trust and understanding that comes from shared goals and tangible results, NYSDOT now enjoys greatly improved relationships with environmental agencies and groups. We now tend to be viewed as part of the solution instead of part of the problem - and get treated accordingly.

Within the context of the Department's procedures and this Initiative, it is now the practice of NYSDOT to:

- ▶ Coordinate and communicate closely with State and federal resource agencies to identify opportunities to advance State and federal environmental policies, programs and objectives.

- ▶ Ensure that all necessary steps are taken in planning, design and construction to avoid and minimize adverse effects of transportation projects and operations on important elements of the environment and adjacent communities.
- ▶ Proactively plan, design, construct and maintain transportation projects in an environmentally sound manner using context sensitive design to meet transportation needs while at the same time protecting, conserving, restoring or enhancing important natural and man-made resources. Context sensitive design is the proactive approach to design that looks at the project within the context of its site, while gathering and including the public's input throughout the design process.
- ▶ Incorporate into DOT capital and maintenance projects specific design features or facilities to mitigate unavoidable adverse impacts to the environment.
- ▶ Consider and implement, as appropriate, measures to enhance natural and man-made resources above and beyond project-specific permit and mitigation requirements.
- ▶ Incorporate, where practicable, environmental projects funded by local agencies or groups into ongoing NYSDOT projects as "Environmental Betterments".
- ▶ Promote an environmental and context sensitive design ethic within all Department organizations.

It is essential that adoption of an environmental ethic is truly supported throughout the organization. To ensure a shift from vision to reality, NYSDOT management developed policy-setting issuances. Regions and Main Office program areas developed Environmental Initiative Action Plans based on the goals and objectives of the Environmental Initiative. NYSDOT has also established a working group representing all Department areas which meets monthly to discuss issues, progress plans, and communicate lessons learned.

Public works agencies may experience initial difficulties with acceptance of this ethic. Like most sociological evolution, there may be resistance at the start, but once people become engaged, the momentum gears up. There may be an initial perception that, by incorporating environmental features into the transportation projects, the project costs substantially increase. Consequently, there may be concerns on how to fund these "add-ons". Actually, many project enhancements, such as fish access sites, wetland improvements, or scenic overlooks, can be included without adding significant costs simply by incorporating them into project staging and construction. Others may be funded by a community, resource agency or environmental group, but built by the public works agency at lower costs. Further, we are convinced that the time saved through better relations and quicker buy-in results in project cost savings while producing a better product.

NYSDOT's Environmental Initiative is more than just an effort to incorporate environmental features into a project, streamline a regulatory process or improve interagency communications. It is a public service ethic that provides a philosophical basis for accomplishing all these things and more. It is about a public agency taking pride in embracing its larger responsibilities.

More information on NYSDOT's Environmental Initiative can be found at [www.dot.state.ny.us/eab/envinit.html](http://www.dot.state.ny.us/eab/envinit.html)