

Successes **in** Stewardship

<http://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/strmlng/es4newsltrs.asp>

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FHWA Hosts Environmental Consultation Peer Exchange on Successful Coordination Practices

On January 27, 2009, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) hosted an Environmental Consultation Peer Exchange to discuss successful coordination among environmental resource agencies, State Departments of Transportation (DOTs), and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) during the transportation planning and project development processes. The purpose of the peer exchange was to showcase examples of how DOTs and MPOs conduct consultations with resource agencies and to identify approaches and notable practices that can best facilitate integration of transportation planning and the environmental review process while fully meeting the consultation requirements of Section 6001 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). These requirements include (1) consultation with resource agencies responsible for land-use management, natural resources, environmental protection, conservation, and historic preservation through comparisons of resource maps and inventories, and (2) discussion of potential environmental mitigation activities.



Participants at the Colorado Environmental Forum discuss environmental consultation practices to meet the requirements of SAFETEA-LU Section 6001. Photo courtesy of Colorado DOT.

Peer-Exchange Framework

A primary focus of the FHWA's Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) program and the [Integrated Planning Work Group](#) (IPWG) under Executive Order (EO) 13274 is outreach and training on the environmental provisions in the transportation planning regulations. On the basis of this focus, FHWA organized the peer exchange to share examples of successful agency consultation.

The peer exchange had four primary goals:

- To highlight examples of successful coordination among environmental resource agencies, state DOTs, and MPOs during the planning process and throughout project development.
- To explore new approaches and identify noteworthy practices for considering the environment during transportation planning.
- To share experiences and gain insight from peers.
- To increase collaboration and consultation.

The format included three peer presentations, each followed by a facilitated discussion. First, representatives from the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), the US Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS), and the Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments (PPACG) presented examples of early collaboration and data-sharing. Next, the California DOT (Caltrans), the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), and the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) presented the benefits of DOT-funded positions for planning agencies and discussed how to engage resource agencies while developing transportation plans. Finally, the USFWS, the Conservation Fund, and Gannett Fleming, Inc., presented the benefits of a Green Infrastructure approach to corridor transportation improvements, as demonstrated in the Maryland US Route 301 transportation study.

Showcased Strategies and Approaches

Transportation planning and environmental resource agencies face a variety of challenges. For transportation planning agencies, these include limited guidance or examples of incorporating mitigation into regional transportation plans and a

lack of training on the role and process of resource agency reviews. For resource agencies, challenges include limited availability of staff and funding to contribute to the development of mitigation plans in a regional transportation plan and a lack of familiarity with the transportation planning process. The peer exchange was designed to highlight strategies and approaches that may help participants to overcome these types of challenges.

Approaches and strategies presented were as follows:

- *Early collaboration and data-sharing in Colorado:* CDOT's pilot project, Strategic Transportation, Environmental and Planning Process for Urbanizing Places (STEP UP), is designed to streamline environmental review and regional planning. STEP UP is a partnership among FHWA, CDOT, USEPA, and the North Front Range MPO. Since 2003, it has been a model for statewide planning and environmental linkage review.

In May 2007, CDOT held a Statewide Environmental Forum to bring together local transportation officials and officials from resource and regulatory agencies to further discuss the linkages between planning and environmental review. Representatives from transportation planning organizations were seated at tables by region, while facilitators from different resource agencies rotated around the room and discussed resources specific to each region. CDOT found this forum to be a successful tool for regulatory and resource agencies to share information.

- *Caltrans-funded positions for planning:* Caltrans recognizes that, for agency collaboration to be successful, participating agencies need to have a common language and understanding of major issues. Past experience with Caltrans-funded positions within resource agencies has helped to foster interagency coordination and information-sharing. Caltrans is currently funding a pilot (one-year) position with USEPA in which a transportation planner is located at Caltrans but employed by USEPA. The objective is to obtain a better understanding of each agency's mission and to help to develop a common language across agencies to meet SAFETEA-LU requirements and develop better projects.

Results from Caltrans to date are that dedicated positions are especially beneficial in improving early coordination and decision-making and in creating better working relationships. USEPA has found that the planning-focused position allows it to successfully identify important issues prior to the development of future National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents.

- *Maryland's corridor transportation improvements – A Green Infrastructure Approach:* Maryland US Route 301 is a 13-mile corridor in southern Maryland. In 2005, the Maryland US Route 301 Project was restarted with use of a new approach called Green Infrastructure. This was a procedural and policy shift with a commitment to bridge major stream crossings, develop an Interagency Work Group process, and emphasize environmental stewardship. USFWS has had a primary role in the ecosystem-based mitigation for the US Route 301 project, specifically in evaluating stream corridors, assessing existing stream conditions, and analyzing the restoration potential for these streams. The agency has developed objectives and made implementation recommendations for potential conservation and restoration sites. The Green Infrastructure approach has resulted in early planning and coordination and effective communication among agencies.

Recommendations

The peer exchange concluded with a virtual roundtable discussion via teleconference/webinar among on-site presenters and participants logging in remotely. During the discussions, two major themes emerged: the need for additional collaboration in decision-making, and the need for additional information on defining mitigation strategies.

Participants identified the following areas requiring further exploration to help strengthen environmental consultation in the future:

- Definition of mitigation strategies.
- Identification of best practices for:
 - Engaging State Historic Preservation Offices in transportation planning.
 - Engaging local government and resource agencies.
 - Making decisions “stick.”
- Organization of additional peer exchanges on the optimization tool used in the Maryland US Route 301 project and on funding opportunities available for dedicated positions.
- Continuation of training and cross-educational opportunities.

Moving Forward

Peer-exchange participants agreed that the event was highly beneficial and will help them to develop programs and activities that encourage greater coordination among transportation and resource agencies. Many agencies expressed the hope of piloting various activities in order to find the most efficient and effective methods to improve decision-making and to meet and go beyond consultation requirements.

As mentioned throughout the peer exchange, there are many online resources for helping agencies find effective practices suited to their needs. View some of these examples at <http://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/integ/practices.asp>.

A [full report](#) describing peer-exchange presentations and outcomes can be found on the [FHWA Environmental Review Toolkit](#) website.

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Look What's New!

- On March 24th, 2009, the FHWA/FTA Final Rule on Environmental Impact and Related Procedures (23 CFR 771) was posted in to the [Federal Register](#).
- **Reminder:** Please Take the FHWA Environmental Review Toolkit Website Survey. The survey is for new and existing users of the website. This survey is designed to tell FHWA how users use the Environmental Review Toolkit, and how the website could be improved. The survey is located on the homepage at <http://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/>
- New information has been added to the [Planning and Environment Linkages \(PEL\) section of the Environmental Review Toolkit Homepage](#). Visit the PEL page to learn more about Implementation and Effective Practices.
- The secretaries of both the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Transportation announced a new partnership to promote sustainable communities through coordinated housing and transportation initiatives. To learn more view the U.S. DOT [press release](#).

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