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THE NATURE OF CONTEXT SENSITIVE SOLUTIONS, STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVEMENT AND CRITICAL ISSUES IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

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Stakeholder involvement in the planning process is of paramount importance.

Over the last several decades many transportation and planning agencies have experienced conflicting demands emerging from the need to develop projects in an expeditious manner while at the same time involving stakeholders in the decision-making process, which is sometimes perceived as slowing down project delivery and/or resulting in additional costs. Given this tension between apparently conflicting demands, this report seeks to bring more clarity about how the stakeholder involvement for transportation projects is being carried out and what best practices may be recommended for the urban environment.

This study examines stakeholder engagement in the context of a relatively new policy framework – Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS), which involves taking the surrounding environment and its physical and historical characteristics into account during project development while supporting the early integration of different types of stakeholders into the planning process. The report reviews current practices for the application of context-oriented planning, and suggests ways for optimal stakeholder engagement. The report pays particular attention to stakeholders' involvement in projects within urban centers, where there is likely to be more complexity, both in terms of the number of stakeholders and end users affected.

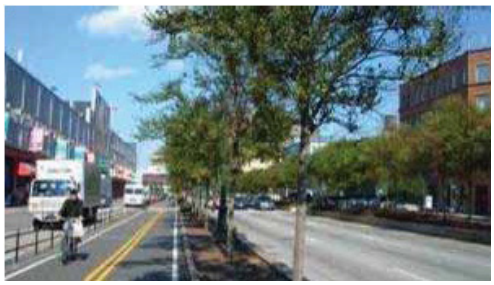
Study Methods

The methodology for this study followed a two-pronged approach. The authors combined information obtained from a literature review and case studies to arrive at best practices for the involvement of stakeholders in the CSS process in the urban environment. The literature review included an evaluation of various CSS studies and an identification of key features of CSS in urban centers. In addition, the review was used to identify potential case studies and to developed a criteria set to select relevant projects that could be analyzed in further detail and render useful information about the state of the CSS practice. Four case studies were completed. All cases studies incorporated information from a questionnaire and follow-up interviews with the project managers at lead agencies. When developing the summary of key features and current state of the CSS practice regarding stakeholder engagement and community consultation processes, the team also drew from previous case studies and this provided a larger analytical base when identifying CSS best practices in urban settings.

Findings and Policy Implications

The National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) requires Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and public consultation processes on all projects with the potential to affect the human and natural environment. For all such projects, the CSS approach could facilitate

the planning process and aid in the implementation of the NEPA Act and the environmental impact assessment. By integrating the public at the very early planning stages (such as visioning exercises to define the problem to be addressed), the responsible agencies can avoid alienating stakeholders and expensive legal challenges while at the same time designing projects that are truly representative of the community values, the contextual environment and the history of the place.



Several suggestions for best practice regarding stakeholder involvement in the CSS process are made in this report, which include:

- Adopt statewide CSS policies and procedures through State DOTs (to help agencies formalize the process, provide appropriate level of resources, and bring added transparency and legitimization to the consultation process while at the same time informing the public about what to expect),
- Improve interagency coordination regarding the implementation and execution of CSS policies,
- Build multi-disciplinary teams, with design, operations and maintenance professionals involved during the planning phase,
- Commit resources to the identification of all affected stakeholders
- Plan for the early and continuous integration of stakeholders into the planning process (instead of integrating them at a late stage),
- Keep all stakeholders informed about progress, and
- Account for costs, benefits and avoided costs associated with the public involvement and consultation process.

Implementation of the recommendations would require institutionalizing these practices through state laws and local agency ordinances. To ensure that such practices would be cost beneficial, records should be kept of benefits and costs associated with stakeholder involvement and procedures adjusted accordingly.

About the Authors

Marta Panero, Ph.D., is a Research Scientist, working at the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service during the extent of this research project.

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To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2610.html

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