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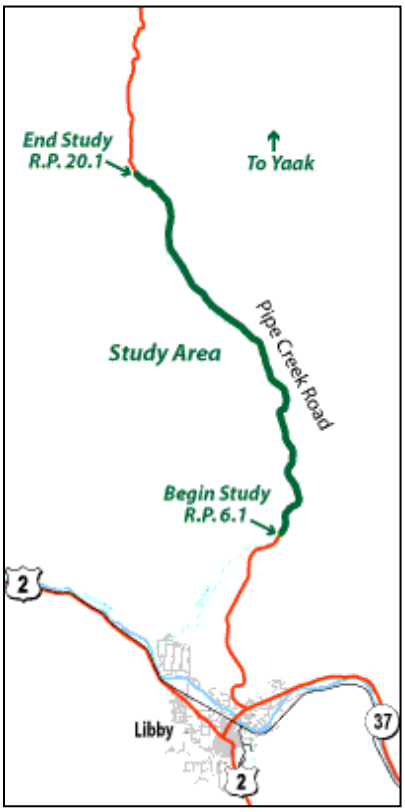
Montana Links Planning and NEPA through Corridor Planning Studies

Connecting transportation planning and environmental review is a way to build interagency relationships that can reduce the time and cost of project development, and can result in projects that more effectively address transportation and environmental issues. The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) presented guidelines in 2005 that recommend a corridor or sub-area planning study to inform decisions during environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Since 2002, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) has used corridor studies to link planning and environmental project review. MDT's corridor planning studies can serve as a model for other States to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of transportation planning and project development.



The 14-mile Libby North Corridor lies north of Libby, Montana along Pipe Creek Road (MT-567). (Image courtesy of MDT)

Corridor Planning in Montana

Corridor planning studies ensure coordination between MDT's planning and project development processes. Before MDT began these studies, the two processes occurred separately and less efficiently. Engineering staff responsible for project development would identify an engineering deficiency, advance a preliminary design concept, and develop an environmental document under NEPA, absent consideration of planning level efforts or funding constraints. Environmental review of regionally significant projects would often result in a costly Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to meet NEPA requirements.

Due to the separation of these processes, environmental staff often repeated data collection and analysis that had already been conducted during the planning process. In addition, neither process seriously considered non-construction alternatives such as operational improvements and enhanced maintenance plans. Consequently, the environmental review process often recommended alternatives that were not feasible, and ultimately inhibited MDT from implementing solutions to the underlying transportation problems. MDT saw the need to link the planning and environmental review processes to address transportation needs more efficiently and comprehensively. As a result, MDT's Rail, Transit, and Planning Division worked with the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Montana Division Office to develop the corridor planning study process in 2002. The Rail, Transit, and Planning Division currently manages the corridor planning studies.

MDT reaches out to Federal, State, regional, and local agencies to recommend corridors that would benefit from a planning study. The agency selects corridors that have one or more of the following characteristics: the community considers the potential solutions to transportation problems to be controversial; the community has identified the corridor for preservation for future transportation improvements; and/or the corridor has environmental constraints that might lead to an EIS or Environmental Assessment. MDT may also select a corridor on the basis of its planned projects. MDT is more likely to select corridors with regionally significant or high-cost projects, as well as projects with many alternatives or alternatives that are not clearly defined.

Once MDT selects a corridor for study, staff establishes a Corridor Planning Team that consists of local representatives; MDT planning, environmental, and engineering staff; the FHWA Division Office staff; and Federal and/or State resource agencies with interests in the corridor area. The Corridor Planning Team follows a flexible and adaptable process to identify and address the unique issues in each corridor. MDT and the Montana Division Office jointly developed the following process, which is documented in the Montana Business Process to Link Planning Studies and NEPA/MEPA Reviews report:

1. Develop a corridor study work plan, including an assessment of the project's complexity, a determination of the level of effort required, and a schedule.
2. Prepare an existing and projected conditions report, documenting transportation deficiencies and environmental concerns with input from resource and other governmental agencies and the public.
3. Identify needs, issues, and goals, and develop related screening criteria. The team considers the existing and projected conditions report in identifying needs, issues, and goals.
4. Identify and analyze a set of improvement options.
5. Recommend improvement options with identified potential impacts and mitigation opportunities.
6. Prepare a draft corridor study report that documents the planning process, key findings, needs, screening criteria, draft recommendations, and next steps. The team conducts public outreach to solicit comments on the draft report.
7. Make final recommendations for the corridor that include both short- and long-term improvement options. The final recommendations serve as the corridor plan, which may lead to project development and environmental review. If MDT moves forward with project development, members of the Corridor Planning Team will bring data and analysis from the corridor planning study, if applicable, to their work in environmental review under NEPA. The involvement of key planning, environment, and engineering staff in the Corridor Planning Team facilitates the transition between the corridor study and project development.

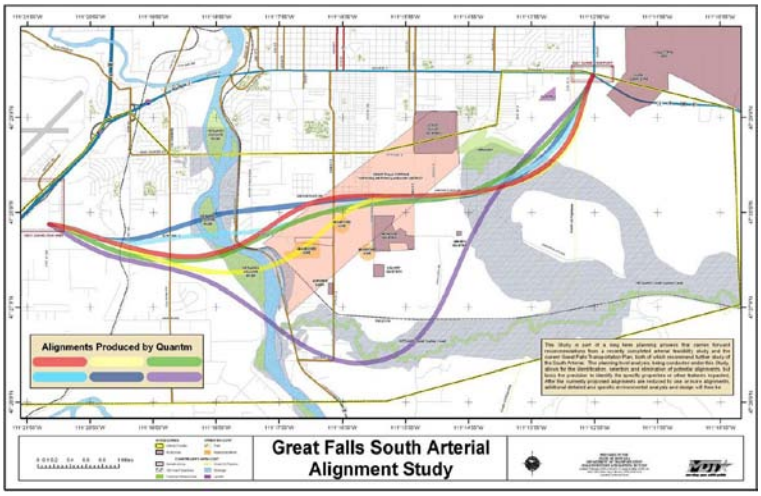
Highlighted Corridor Planning Studies

The following two case studies, the Libby North Corridor Study and the Great Falls South Arterial Alignment Study, demonstrate how MDT works with partner agencies and the public to link planning and environmental review through the steps of the corridor planning study process.

Libby North Corridor Study

In July 2006, MDT partnered with Lincoln County, the U.S. Forest Service, FHWA, and other agencies to initiate the Libby North Corridor Study. MDT selected the 14-mile corridor because of the unique engineering and ecological challenges associated with its proximity to the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone and Pipe Creek, a critical bull trout habitat. MDT and its partners hoped to better understand the environmental challenges associated with a range of transportation improvement options that offered the potential to address safety and environmental issues in the corridor.

The Corridor Planning Team followed the seven steps of MDT's corridor planning study process to understand and address the transportation needs in the Libby North Corridor. Based on the analysis, resource agency input, and public comment, the Team recommended rehabilitation of the roadway, incorporating minor realignments in specific locations. The Libby North Corridor Study was successful because the Team was able to understand the challenges and the full range of improvement options before identifying recommended improvements. The input of resource agencies led to consideration of options with minimal environmental impacts. The Team selected a low-impact option for improving safety, maintaining the scenic character of the corridor, and minimizing impacts to threatened and endangered species, which enabled the State to advance the project as a categorical exclusion instead of undertaking an EIS. MDT reported that its partner agencies and members of the public appreciated the study's comprehensive look at the complex issues along the corridor and the opportunities for involvement throughout the study. In July 2009, the Transportation Research Board recognized the Team for its exemplary interagency partnerships on this project.



The Great Falls Corridor Planning Team evaluated numerous improvement options for the south arterial link between I-15 and US 87/89. (Image courtesy of MDT)

Great Falls South Arterial Alignment Study

The City of Great Falls and Cascade County officials had discussed an arterial link between Interstate 15 and US Highway 87/89 since the 1960s. In 2004, a city- and county-led feasibility study determined that an arterial running through the southern portion of Great Falls would improve mobility in the area. Upon receiving a Congressional earmark for planning the proposed roadway, Great Falls and Cascade County partnered with MDT and FHWA to consider general alignment options through a comprehensive corridor planning study.

The Great Falls South Arterial Alignment Study, completed in 2009, used Quantm (a route optimization tool that considers engineering design standards and environmental constraints) to identify and evaluate potential alignment options for the arterial link. The Corridor Planning Team used the results of the Quantm analysis, along with environmental impact analyses and agency and public comments, to recommend a preferred alignment. The study's findings can feed into a future NEPA review process if local officials choose to advance the project. The corridor planning study recommended an alignment that

is very expensive and lacks community consensus, and the recommended corridor is therefore unlikely to advance to construction. However, the Team deemed the effort a success because it helped local government officials weigh the project's transportation benefits against the high environmental, economic, and social costs of project construction. The corridor study helped local leaders decide against the construction of a south arterial, based on the documented costs and benefits.

Benefits and Applications of Corridor Planning Studies

Montana's corridor planning studies yield concrete benefits through linking planning and environmental review. First, corridor planning studies can reduce the amount of time between initial project planning and construction. Time savings translate into cost savings, particularly when a corridor planning study recommends an improvement option that has no or very few adverse environmental impacts. Second, local stakeholders and members of the public can significantly increase their participation in the transportation delivery process through the corridor studies. Unlike prior MDT-led planning processes, the needs and goals of local stakeholders guide the studies, attracting greater public participation. Finally, MDT reports increased cooperation among State and Federal transportation and resource agencies since it started completing corridor planning studies in 2002. Interagency collaboration can lead to more comprehensive analyses and more effective outcomes in studied corridors. Montana's corridor planning studies can serve as models for other States that wish to achieve project delivery cost and time savings through connecting planning and NEPA.

Montana's corridor planning studies exemplify the concepts promoted by FHWA's Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) program and Every Day Counts (EDC) Initiative. PEL encourages the use of information developed in planning to inform the NEPA process. As demonstrated by the Montana corridor planning studies, incorporating planning documents and decisions from the earliest stages of project planning into the environmental review process can lead to a seamless decisionmaking process that minimizes duplication of effort, promotes environmental stewardship, and reduces delays in project implementation. Corridor planning complements NEPA and ensures decisions are made at the appropriate level, while considering improvement options that fit within the available funding. As such, corridor planning studies are a tool that States can employ to meet the project delivery streamlining goals of the EDC Initiative. The corridor planning studies not only generated significant benefits in terms of cost, and agency and public participation, but they also helped the State to better accomplish national FHWA objectives aimed at completing transportation projects quickly and in an environmentally sound manner.

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Look What's New!

- The Greenroads Foundation released an updated version of its Greenroads Ratings System Manual, Version 1.5. The Manual contains goals for mandatory and voluntary best practices, as well as requirements and documentation to meet these goals. The Greenroads Foundation is soliciting comments and applications until May 7.
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is accepting grant applications for $1.9 million in funding for environmental education projects and programs. The grants are for innovative projects that design, demonstrate, and/or disseminate environmental education practices, methods, or techniques. For more information, visit the Environmental Education Grant Program website.
- On February 28, 2011, the Department of Energy announced an initiative to provide technical assistance to Federal agencies to reduce fossil fuel consumption. Assistance may include inventory analysis, optimum acquisition plans, alternative fuel use plans, right sizing, and driver behavior change. For additional information please visit the Federal Energy Management Program's technical assistance website.
- FHWA is seeking nominations for the Exemplary Ecosystem Initiative (EEI), and the Exemplary Human Environment Initiative (EHEI). EEI identifies ecosystem and habitat projects that are unique in terms of scope, innovation, or quality. EHEI recognizes examples of transportation projects that either create or improve conditions for human activities. FHWA Division Offices should contact Julianne Schwarzer for a submission form. Nominations are due on April 15, 2011.