

Successes **in** Stewardship

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FHWA Peer Exchange on Using Corridor Planning to Inform NEPA

On December 2–3, 2009, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) hosted “Using Corridor Planning to Inform the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).” The purpose of the peer exchange was to examine how agencies are using corridor planning studies to inform NEPA and project development, as provided under the authority of FHWA and the Federal Transit Administration. Agencies can use corridor studies to produce a wide range of analyses or to facilitate decisions in the planning process, but the studies must include certain criteria in order for information to be incorporated into the NEPA process. Information gathered from participants in this event will be considered by FHWA as future guidance on corridor planning is developed.



Peer-exchange participants listen to presentations on corridor plans. Other FHWA and agency staff participated remotely via teleconference. (Courtesy of the Volpe Center)

The Interagency Tiering, Corridor, and Sub-Area Studies Group organized the peer exchange in an effort to provide State Departments of Transportation (DOTs), Metropolitan Planning Organizations, and resource agencies with examples of successful practices and to inform future approaches to corridor planning. The organizing group, led by FHWA, is comprised of Federal transportation and resource agencies.

The peer exchange included five presentations on State and regional corridor plans, each followed by facilitated discussion. FHWA Deputy Administrator Gregory Nadeau kicked off the exchange with an overview of the Administrator’s “Every Day Counts” initiative and its goals to improve project delivery, promote technology innovation, and green internal operations at FHWA. In his remarks, Nadeau emphasized that the goal is not simply to expedite project delivery but also to enhance the quality of projects and the surrounding environment.

A full report about the peer exchange is available on the [FHWA’s PEL website](#). An overview of the highlighted case studies is provided below, and links to the corridor plans can be found on the [Planning and Environmental Linkages \(PEL\) Effective Practices](#) page.

Colorado’s Parker Road Corridor Study

Colorado’s Parker Road Corridor Study examined possible transportation solutions for the increasingly congested and rapidly developing Parker Road Corridor (SH 83). This eight-mile major north-south arterial has four to six through-lanes, extending north into Denver and south toward Colorado Springs. Current and projected traffic volumes as well as increasing traffic congestion along Parker Road had attracted attention from local officials and their constituents. The traffic situation prompted Arapahoe County to initiate a corridor transportation study to address existing and future regional mobility and local accessibility needs. The study included an analysis of alternatives to determine the most appropriate methods to improve traffic flow through the corridor. Improvements to the roadway corridor, major intersections, bicycle/pedestrian facilities, transit services, and system-management elements were recommended.

Colorado DOT (CDOT) documented the corridor study through a Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) matrix, a summary of agencies’ expectations and concerns about proposed corridor improvements. The matrix provided greater understanding of the conditions under which findings made during planning could flow directly into NEPA. The open dialogue helped agency management to offer support and eventually led to the signing of a PEL partnering agreement among 15 signatory agencies. (For more information on the Colorado PEL Partnering Agreement, see the December 2009

issue of [Successes in Stewardship](#).) CDOT also documented the study process in its [PEL Questionnaire](#). The questionnaire records planning analyses that can be used in NEPA, such as level of public involvement, resource agency engagement, and identified impacts. CDOT bound the questionnaire into the final study report so that planning decisions might serve as a starting point for staff in future NEPA studies.

Pennsylvania's I-83 Master Plan

Pennsylvania's I-83 Master Plan is a transportation-planning feasibility study aimed at identifying, planning, and programming future transportation-improvement projects for an 11-mile section of Interstate 83 (I-83) in Harrisburg. I-83 extends from I-81, just northeast of Harrisburg, to downtown Baltimore, Maryland. It is an important link in the National Highway System and a vital component of local access in and around the greater Harrisburg metropolitan area. The I-83 Master Plan identifies corridor-wide transportation needs and problem areas, including roadway capacity, safety characteristics, and the expected life of the existing roadway pavement. Additionally, it proposes design concepts that would improve the highway's physical structure and considers improvements that would make the corridor function more efficiently, such as expansion of Intelligent Transportation System initiatives and public transit enhancements. An inventory of environmental features within the corridor is included as a means of identifying environmental and community issues of future transportation-improvement projects. Ultimately, it was concluded that there is a need to identify and prioritize future projects in the I-83 corridor on the basis of logical termini and independent utility.

Acknowledging that financial constraints would limit its ability to fully fund all required projects simultaneously, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) divided the corridor into four project sections that could be programmed, studied, and constructed with logical termini and independent utility. On the basis of the analyses and decisions made in the corridor planning process, each section will likely proceed into the NEPA process, probably being processed as two environmental assessments and two categorical exclusions.

Dallas-Fort Worth's Regional Outer Loop Corridor Feasibility Study

The North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) conducted the Regional Outer Loop Corridor Feasibility Study to evaluate the need to develop an outer loop around the Dallas-Fort Worth region. This 240-mile network of transportation routes could incorporate existing and new highways, railways, and utility right-of-ways. A secondary purpose of the study was to identify a single one-half-to-one-mile-wide locally preferred corridor (LPC) for the Regional Outer Loop and to define sections of independent utility for the LPC.

The study based the need for new transportation facilities on current population and projected growth within the region. Importantly, it also involved public and agency input throughout the process, including members of the NCTCOG Transportation Resource Agency Consultation and Environmental Streamlining effort. NCTCOG has collected data for existing and future conditions in the corridor and has had early and continuous information exchange with its partners to integrate environmental planning factors into all study phases. It is still in the corridor evaluation phase and has not made any final recommendations, with the exception of recommendations for a small length of road southeast of Dallas. NCTCOG expects to complete NEPA documents for each segment identified that has independent utility and logical termini.

Idaho's US-20 Ashton to Montana State Line Corridor Plan

Idaho's US-20 Corridor Plan addresses the corridor from Ashton Hill Bridge in the Town of Ashton to the Montana State line. Idaho DOT initiated this plan to assess the corridor's condition and identify necessary improvements to meet user needs over the next 20 years. US-20 is predominantly a two-lane rural highway containing some passing lanes that acts as a critical gateway to Yellowstone National Park and Henry's Fork of the Snake River. The corridor is characterized by both heavy tourist traffic and local traffic. In addition, the corridor accommodates the majority of freight movement between West Yellowstone, southern Montana, and the Snake River Plain. The US-20 Corridor Plan is the second phase of a corridor analysis (the first phase was completed in 1999), commissioned to ensure that improvements to the entire corridor between Idaho Falls and Montana are guided by a long-term vision. The plan follows National Cooperative Highway Research Program guidance for conducting a corridor plan outside of the formal NEPA process and recognizes the conflict that could occur when alternatives are eliminated during the planning process.

Montana's Libby North Corridor Planning Study

Montana's Libby North Corridor Planning Study evaluated an environmentally complex 14-mile section of Highway 567 to develop a comprehensive plan for managing and improving the corridor. This section of highway abuts Pipe Creek in Kootenai National Forest in the Cabinet-Yaak Mountains of northwest Montana. Highway 567 is a two-lane roadway, functionally classified as a rural major collector, that provides access to U.S. Forest Service lands for skiing, hunting, camping, logging, and hiking activities. The corridor is adjacent to a grizzly-bear "no-take" zone and is populated by other

endangered and threatened species. Major reconstruction on the corridor would be prohibitively expensive due to the habitat sensitivity of the study area.

Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) followed transportation planning regulations and considered subsequent NEPA documentation in developing the corridor plan. MDT collaborated with local jurisdictions, Federal and State resource agencies, and the public to identify transportation problems and effective solutions. The study process included: researching existing conditions; documenting actual and projected environmental, geotechnical, and land-use conditions; forecasting future economic and population growth; identifying goals and analyzing alternatives for the corridor from the perspectives of constructability, financial feasibility, and public appearance; and recommending improvements and management strategies for the current and long-term safety and operation of the corridor. MDT's assessment of the corridor during the planning stage allowed for better understanding of corridor limitations and needs, and of improvements that could be reasonably pursued for this environmentally-sensitive corridor. The process ultimately resulted in a shift from a costly environmental impact statement to an anticipated categorical exclusion, which will lead to substantial time- and cost-savings.

Observations and Recommendations

The peer exchange concluded with a productive roundtable discussion that included presenters as well as remote participants via teleconference. The major theme to emerge was that corridor planning offers agencies more flexibility to consider issues and opportunities early in the decisionmaking process rather than later in project development. This flexibility often leads to substantial cost-savings and better projects.

Peer-exchange participants recommended that FHWA develop future guidance to clarify when planning should be used to inform the NEPA process, and that it provide specific strategies to integrate planning and NEPA. These clarifications may include guidance on how much detail should be reflected in corridor studies and what level of analysis and types of documentation would be appropriate for information to be applied to NEPA. Guidance should also clarify when it is most practical for agencies to conduct a planning study as opposed to a tiered NEPA document, and it should address mitigation and consider cumulative impacts at the corridor level.

A full report of the peer exchange and other information about the PEL program is available on [FHWA's PEL website](#).

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Look What's New!

•FHWA PEL Program – Training Announcement

Due to the overwhelming interest in the trainings offered in 2009, the PEL Program is offering three additional sessions of the training webcast "PEL 101: The Tools for Adopting and Implementing a PEL Approach." The purpose of the training is to help transportation and resource agency practitioners to better understand, coordinate, and integrate transportation planning and the environmental review process.

The webcast is being offered on three dates:

- Tuesday, March 23, 11 a.m. – 1 p.m. EST ([Register here](#))
- Wednesday, May 19, 2 – 4 p.m. EST ([Register here](#))
- Thursday, July 22, 1 – 3 p.m. EST ([Register here](#))

Registration for each session is limited. To register online, follow the link next to each specific date. Once you register, you will receive an e-mail with instructions on how to access the webcast. For assistance in registering, please contact Gina Filosa at gina.filosa@dot.gov.

•Context Sensitive Solutions National Dialog Workshop

The fourth CSS National Dialog Workshop will take place on Tuesday, March 16, in Piscataway, New Jersey. The one-day workshop will include an overview of CSS plus presentations on exemplary CSS projects, plans and programs for the surrounding region. [Advance registration](#) is required, and participants must register by Tuesday, March 9.

•New CEQ NEPA Guidance

In conjunction with NEPA's 40th Anniversary Celebration, the Council for Environmental Quality is publishing three draft NEPA guidance documents for review and comment. The documents cover Climate Change, Categorical Exclusions, and Mitigation, and they are available at the [CEQ website](#).

•DOT Announces TIGER Grant Funding

On February 17, DOT Secretary Ray LaHood issued a [press release](#) announcing 51 recipients of Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grants. Over 1,400 projects were submitted to compete for \$1.5 billion in funding.