

Successes **in** Stewardship

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Interagency Relationships Help Bring About Planning and Environmental Linkages Agreement in Colorado

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) developed the Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) Program in 2006 to enhance existing efforts to integrate the transportation planning and environmental review processes. While several State Departments of Transportation (DOTs) and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) were already working to achieve this goal, the [FHWA PEL Program](#) was designed both to support these efforts and to encourage others to do the same. The program provides technical assistance, effective practices, and other resources to assist transportation agencies and stakeholders in meeting and exceeding legislative requirements. As more State DOTs and MPOs adopt PEL practices, successful new programs and partnerships emerge, helping to streamline environmental reviews. (For more details on PEL, see the April 2007 issue of [Successes in Stewardship](#).) This issue of *Successes in Stewardship* details a current application of the PEL approach and how it has evolved to become a more established practice in Colorado.

Colorado has been creating linkages between planning and environmental review since 2003. Over time, both the Colorado DOT (CDOT) and the FHWA Colorado Division Office (FHWA-CO) have formed strong working relationships with Federal and State resource and regulatory agencies. These relationships were solidified through the interagency Transportation Environmental Resource Council (TERC), which meets quarterly to review CDOT programs and projects and to ensure consistency with resource agency needs. The FHWA-CO Division Administrator and the Executive Director of CDOT serve as co-chairs of TERC. FHWA-CO and CDOT recently coordinated efforts to develop a PEL Partnering Agreement among 15 resource, regulatory, and planning agencies. After a year of preparation and planning, the agreement was signed in June 2009.

Testing PEL Concepts in an MPO Pilot Project

Several years before the PEL approach was developed in Colorado, CDOT and FHWA-CO designed a pilot project aimed at providing a better understanding of the relationship among transportation planning, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and potential streamlining opportunities. The North Front Range MPO (NFRMPO) was selected as the site of the pilot; the MPO served as an important lead in implementing PEL concepts. NFRMPO covers the metropolitan area of Fort Collins, Greeley, and Loveland. This region was a good fit for a pilot project in that it was a manageable size, was undergoing significant growth, and was receptive to innovation. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was selected as a partner for the pilot. The project, Strategic Transportation, Environmental and Planning Process for Urbanizing Places (STEP UP), ran from approximately 2004 through 2007 and allowed CDOT to witness firsthand how the PEL approach could streamline its transportation planning.



Twelve of the 15 signatories gathered on June 11, 2009, to sign the PEL Partnering Agreement. (Photo courtesy of FHWA-CO)

CDOT and NFRMPO collaboratively structured STEP UP around the concept of early and continuous involvement of resource agencies in transportation planning. The pilot gave resource agencies the opportunity to voice concerns while the project was still in the preliminary stages of planning. This early input allowed recommendations to be incorporated without significant setbacks. STEP UP also created guidelines for environmental review and prioritization of projects in the regional transportation planning process. Transportation corridors and projects underwent environmental screening prior to the NEPA process, using Geographic Information System (GIS)-based tools that could identify potential environmental impacts. CDOT and FHWA-CO incorporated lessons learned from STEP UP to create new PEL tools for the State and to

strengthen their relationships with Federal and State resource and regulatory agencies. The success of the pilot also became a motivating factor in formalizing the PEL approach for Colorado's statewide transportation planning.

Developing the Partnering Agreement

At its summer 2008 meeting, TERC approached its chairmen with a request to develop principles that would apply PEL to transportation planning from a programmatic perspective and formalize the streamlining work already underway. CDOT led efforts to coordinate key TERC agencies in creating a partnering agreement. Agencies participating in the initial meetings included FHWA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, EPA Region 8, and the State Historic Preservation Office. To address the challenge of creating a formal document that would be agreeable to multiple agencies, the agreement was written in user-friendly language with the purpose of encouraging use of the PEL approach to meet agency needs and expedite transportation project delivery.

Implementing the Agreement

Implementation of the PEL Partnering Agreement will combine existing programs with new PEL tools. Prior to the agreement, [CDOT instituted a PEL Program](#) with a full-time PEL coordinator and offered training, guidance, and tools for MPOs. One tool, the PEL Questionnaire, guides transportation planners in navigating the PEL process. Following the success of this and other resources, CDOT and FHWA-CO are working to develop new tools to identify project opportunities, given environmental constraints. CDOT is also developing a training course to help staff from resource, regulatory, and local agencies better incorporate the PEL approach.

Applying these tools and implementing the Partnering Agreement will be location-dependent, as the capacity to engage in the PEL process varies by MPO. In Denver, the MPO will identify and designate several key corridors or planning goals for PEL review. Resource agencies will then review these corridors or goals and make recommendations that could affect individual transportation projects. In addition, resource agencies may have the opportunity to be more involved in project review in smaller MPOs. STEP UP in NFRMPO is an example of how implementation can occur in smaller MPOs.

A committee comprised of TERC members held a series of meetings and a half-day workshop in early 2009 to plan for the Partnering Agreement. The workshop gave agency representatives the opportunity to discuss their visions for the agreement and to reconcile points of disagreement. By May 2009, the process had received the support of all participants, including agencies that initially had expressed hesitancy at the prospect of signing such an agreement. A signing ceremony was held in June 2009 to celebrate the accomplishment of bringing together the 15 diverse signatory agencies upon finalization of the PEL Partnering Agreement.

Elements of Agreement Success

The key elements that enabled the success of the partnering agreement were established interagency relationships, a strong environmental ethic in Colorado, and the language used in the agreement. First, the solid working relationships created through TERC were fundamental in overcoming barriers to creating a formalized agreement. Through TERC, resource, regulatory, and transportation agencies were accustomed to working collaboratively to advise CDOT projects and implement PEL projects, such as the STEP UP pilot. The partnering agreement was a natural progression of these relationships.

Second, a strong environmental ethic among Colorado residents and agencies created a supportive climate for writing and approving the PEL Partnering Agreement. Transportation agency officials credit the widespread aspiration for stronger environmental oversight in transportation planning to a culture of outdoor recreation and stewardship among Coloradans. This environmental ethic extends to transportation agency staff, some of whom have worked

previously for resource agencies. For example, the executive director of CDOT was formerly the executive director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources. Many regional offices of Federal resource and regulatory agencies are located in Colorado. This close proximity between transportation and resource agencies provided greater opportunity to foster interagency relationships.

Finally, the authors of the agreement took special care to create open-ended wording that would allow agencies to determine their level of involvement in planning and environmental review processes on a project-by-project basis. The agreement was written in simple, nontechnical language so that all signatory agency personnel could easily understand the PEL approach.

A Model for Interagency Collaboration

Existing partnerships and strong working relationships among transportation and resource agencies are the foundation of the PEL Partnering Agreement. In recent months, Colorado Governor Bill Ritter has emphasized climate change and sustainability as well as the Interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities with U.S. DOT, EPA, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. TERC is talking about using this interagency momentum to adopt new agreements related to livability and sustainability.

The success of the PEL Partnering Agreement has created new opportunities for future collaboration among transportation and resource agencies in Colorado. The agreement offers a continuation of the strong working relationships

built through TERC and will facilitate new connections between diverse interest groups in implementing the PEL approach.

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Look What's New!

- The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Office of Planning and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Office of Systems Planning invite you to visit the newly redesigned ***Transportation Planning Capacity Building (TPCB) website*** at <http://www.planning.dot.gov/>. Visit the site to take advantage of updated training materials, technical assistance resources, and other support geared towards transportation planning for State, MPO, local, regional, and Tribal governments; transit operators; and community leaders.