

Successes **in** Stewardship

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Balancing Infrastructure Improvements with Historic Preservation: The Front Street Rehabilitation Project

In 1991, the City of Natchitoches, Louisiana, applied for (and later received) Transportation Enhancement (TE) funding from the State TE manager to rehabilitate six blocks of its historic Front Street. The Front Street Rehabilitation Project faced many challenges from the start. Residents had concerns that critically needed street improvements would diminish the area's character, and they spoke out publicly against any proposed renovations. These concerns made it difficult for the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LADOTD) to move ahead.

Ultimately, by working cooperatively with and obtaining buy-in from all stakeholders, LADOTD was able to design and implement the improvements to Front Street's surface and subsurface, enhance pedestrian safety, and maintain the character of one of Louisiana's three National Historic Landmark Districts.

The Front Street Challenge

The City of Natchitoches is the oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase and predates the City of New Orleans. Natchitoches is home to eight structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places and to two Historic Districts. Front Street is a 105-year-old brick street running along the Cane River Lake and is the main thoroughfare through downtown historic Natchitoches (Louisiana Highway 6 Business). In 1956, the Louisiana Department of Highways planned to repave Front Street. This would have meant the destruction of the historic bricks, so determined residents publicly objected and lay down in the street to prevent any construction. For the next 52 years, the City made patchwork repairs to the street, but the historic brickwork still required major structural rehabilitation.



View to the south of Front Street, circa 1906. (Image courtesy of LADOTD)

The Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Office of Natural and Human Environment is responsible for managing TE activities and funding, while the States are responsible for selecting projects to fund and determining funding amounts. Each application for TE funds must demonstrate a relationship to surface transportation and qualify under one or more of the 12 categories eligible for TE funding. The City's goal was to implement improvements that would include upgrading the riding surface of the roadway and the stormwater collection system, repairing the roadway base and underground utilities, and creating crosswalks and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-compliant sidewalks. The major challenge facing LADOTD was how to carry out structural renovations to the road's old brick surface while preserving its historic character.

The Road to Rehabilitation

The environmental process for the Front Street Rehabilitation Project did not begin until in 2000 due to delays in securing the necessary funding. Since environmental impacts could not be clearly determined initially, LADOTD prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA). It was concluded that there would be adverse affects on the Historic District and Historic Landmark District if the proposed renovations were completed. In response, a National Park Service (NPS) Technical Assistance Team convened and developed two partial-rebuild alternatives; however, neither alternative satisfied the Purpose and Need of the EA. In addition, local historic preservation groups and business owners had conflicting reactions to the proposed project. Front Street merchants feared that the preservation effort would impede deliveries and result in lost business. Preservationists were concerned that the rehabilitation process would be rushed at the expense of preservation.

In 2004, the mayor of Natchitoches formed a task force made up of LADOTD and NPS staff, business owners, and members of local historic preservation groups. During a four-month period, the Mayoral Task Force discussed options for

reusing the historic bricks, using new materials, incorporating crosswalks, and achieving ADA compliance. The group developed 20 stipulations, most of which addressed the handling, storing, and reuse of the historic bricks. In adherence to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, the NPS agreed to fund the hiring of a Historic American Buildings Survey photographer to create a foot-by-foot photographic record of the brick pattern prior to construction. This allowed the contractor to replicate the exact pattern during the street's rehabilitation.

In 2005, a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was signed by 15 agencies and organizations. The project MOA stipulated many safeguards to protect the interests of stakeholders. An archaeological consultant monitored all earth-moving construction activities. To reduce negative impacts to Front Street businesses, construction took place only in two-block segments. The LADOTD project engineer visited the site daily to meet with both the contractor and the archaeologist. LADOTD made presentations to various organizations and local clubs on the project's progress in order to keep residents informed and to dispel any rumors. The contractor also provided weekly updates in two-minute radio spots.

FHWA approved the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) in 2006. In order to avoid conflict with local festivities, construction did not begin until March 2008. Despite delays from Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, the project was completed in November 2008.

A Positive Outcome

Throughout the project, consistent outreach efforts made LADOTD's commitment to the public clear and eliminated any potential for misunderstanding. The Mayoral Task Force ensured that all stakeholders were on the same page and kept the avenues of communication open. The stewardship exhibited by LADOTD not only satisfied stakeholder and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements but led to a satisfying improvement project. In October 2008, *Roads & Bridges* magazine named Front Street number three in its article "Top 10 Roads." Since the project's completion, Natchitoches residents have provided feedback to LADOTD staff that Front Street road conditions are greatly improved and the road's historic character has been preserved.

Lessons Learned

The lessons learned from the Front Street Rehabilitation Project can be applied to many of America's historic cities and towns. The preservation methods stipulated in the MOA are examples of ways to maintain the integrity of historic resources while improving the infrastructure to meet current demands. Furthermore, the NEPA process shows how effective communication, public outreach, and stakeholder involvement improves the development of an infrastructure project.



Road surface conditions, Front Street at St. Denis in 2000 (left) and 2008 (right). (Images provided by LADOTD)

Provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires Federal agencies to take into account the effects of Federally funded activities and programs on major historic properties.

Section 110 of the Act sets out the broad historic preservation responsibilities of Federal agencies and is intended to ensure that historic preservation is fully integrated into the ongoing programs of all Federal agencies. Section 110 provides more detail on Federal agencies' responsibility to identify and protect historic properties and to avoid unnecessary damage to them. Additionally, it declares that preservation activities are covered as project costs in all undertakings conducted or assisted by a Federal agency.

For more information on TE funding activities, go to <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/te/>.

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Read about the findings from the second FHWA audit of the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) under the Surface Transportation Project Delivery Pilot Program.

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