

A Guide to Transportation Decisionmaking

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U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration
Federal Transit Administration



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Planning

Introduction

Have you ever wondered how decisions are made about transportation? How do government officials decide where to put a bus stop, sidewalk, or bridge? How are these and other transportation decisions made? And how can you make sure your opinions are heard by the right people?

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA)—agencies of the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT)—prepared this guide to answer those questions. This guide is here to inform you how the transportation decisionmaking process uses your input to create a safer, more efficient transportation system that supports your community.

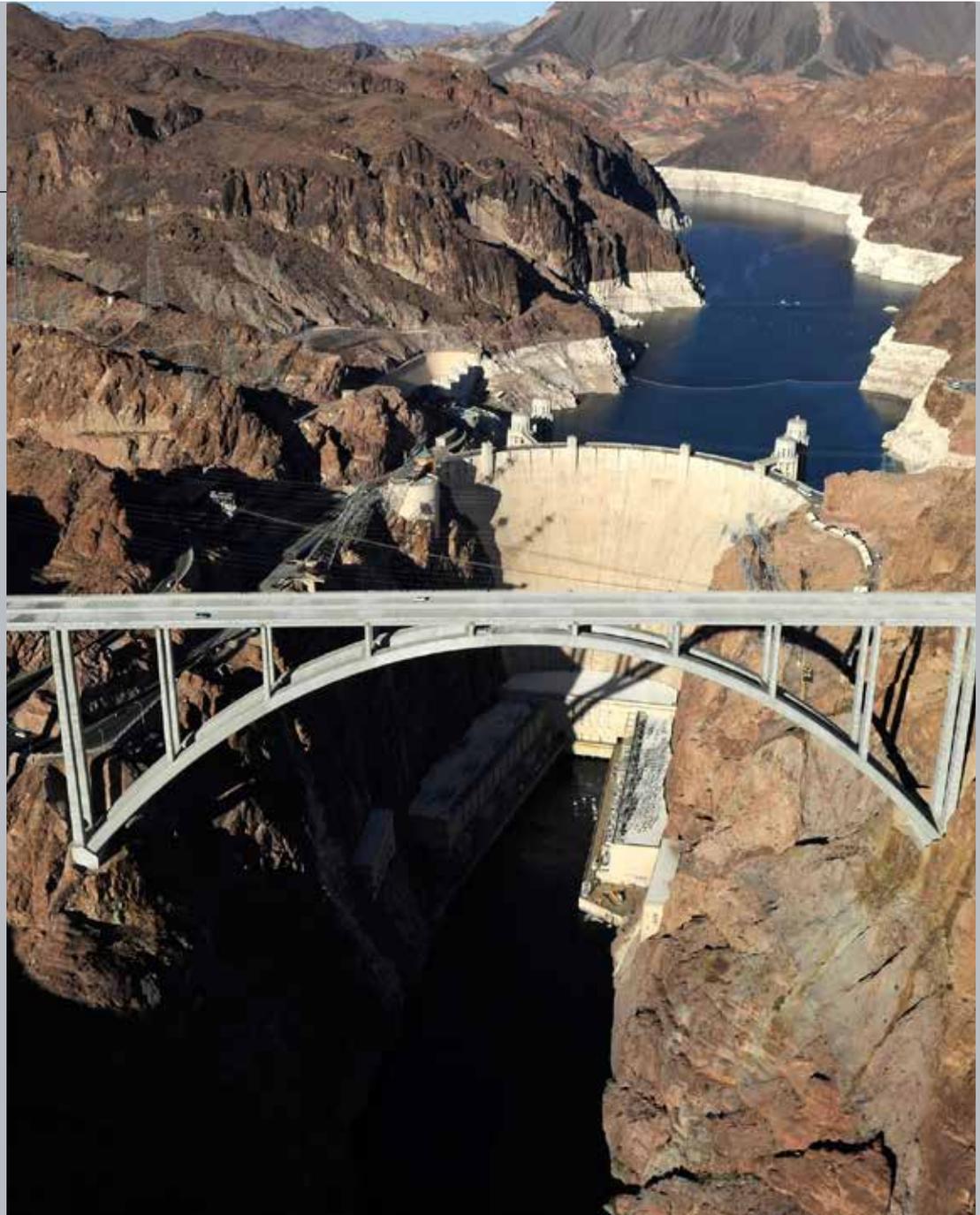


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WHAT IS THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION?

USDOT is the department in the executive branch of the Federal Government that provides national-level guidance, policy, and funding for transportation by air, highway, rail, transit, and water.



GUIDE CONTENTS

This guide discusses the federally required process for transportation decisionmaking. The Federal role is to provide funds, guidance, and standards.

State Departments of Transportation, local governments acting through Metropolitan Planning Organizations, and transit operators make transportation investment decisions. After reading this guide, be sure to learn how to become involved in transportation decisionmaking in your area.

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How the Transportation Decisionmaking Process Starts

Transportation affects nearly every aspect of a person's life: whether you're driving to work, walking to the store, or taking the bus to a baseball game, your transportation system is there to move you. Transportation brings food from the farm to your local store, services to your community, and provides connections to jobs.

You can shape your community by sharing your ideas and participating in transportation decisionmaking. We at FHWA and FTA encourage your involvement throughout the transportation decisionmaking process—from ideas for transportation projects, to construction and operations. With your help the U.S. transportation system will remain among the safest, most efficient, and most environmentally friendly in the world.

If you have any questions about this guide, please contact the following FHWA or FTA offices.

FHWA Office of Planning
www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning
202-366-0106

FTA Office of Planning and Environment
www.fta.dot.gov/about/12347.html
202-366-4033



Photo: ©123RF.com

The Basics of Transportation Decisionmaking

Transportation systems include trains, cars, buses, ferryboats, bicycles, pedestrian paths, and trucks that are accessible for everyone.

Transportation planning is about identifying opportunities to improve mobility for the people and businesses who use transportation systems; it is about providing accessibility for everyone in your community.

Transportation planners are professionals who study and recommend the best ways to operate and manage a transportation system safely and efficiently, today and in the future, to get you to:

- Your home
- Your school
- Your work
- Your vacation
- Your errands
- And anywhere else

Transportation decisionmaking is how transportation planners and communities look for ways to solve current and anticipated transportation problems. Transportation planners think about the system today and the system that will exist over the next 20 years. You have an opportunity to get involved in transportation decisionmaking to make transportation better in your community. Whether you are an individual or an organization, your opinion matters.



Photos: © U.S. Department of Transportation

The Government and Transportation Decisionmaking

Photo: © U.S. Department of Transportation



Transportation decisionmaking is carried out at several levels of government. Transportation planners work across all modes of transportation, and with environmental resource agencies, Tribes, and interested parties as defined by law.*

USDOT surface transportation agencies oversee the transportation planning and project development activities of State Departments of Transportation (State DOTs), Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), and transit agencies. USDOT also supplies a portion of the funding needed for transportation planning and project development.

State DOTs are in every State and territory in the United States. You have probably seen the yellow or orange cones where crews are constructing roads or building bridges across your State. Decisions on why those crews are working on that particular stretch of road were made during the transportation planning process at your State DOT.

*Each State DOT and MPO shall provide citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, private providers of transportation, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled, and other interested parties with a reasonable opportunity to comment on transportation plans.



Photo: © U.S. Department of Transportation

MPOs are organizations that carry out transportation planning at the regional level. Any urbanized area with a population of more than 50,000 has an MPO. An MPO may have *council of governments*, *regional planning commission*, or some similar phrase in its official name.

MPOs are as different as the metropolitan areas they represent. A board made up of local elected officials sets policy for an MPO and adopts long-range plans and short-range programs of future transportation improvements. The general public, as well as various stakeholder groups, such as nonprofit, community-based, and environmental organizations, provide input that informs the policies, plans, and overall program direction that an MPO follows.

Tribal Governments have a government-to-government relationship with US DOT that requires FHWA, FTA, and other Federal agencies to consult with Tribes regarding policy and regulatory matters.

Local governments are responsible for many functions in your community, including addressing the transportation needs for the public using local streets and sidewalks.

Transit agencies are organizations that provide transportation for the public. Public transportation includes buses, subways, light rail, commuter rail, monorail, passenger ferryboats, trolleys, inclined railways, and people movers.

Regional Transportation Planning Organizations consist of local governments outside of metropolitan areas that come together and coordinate with State DOTs.

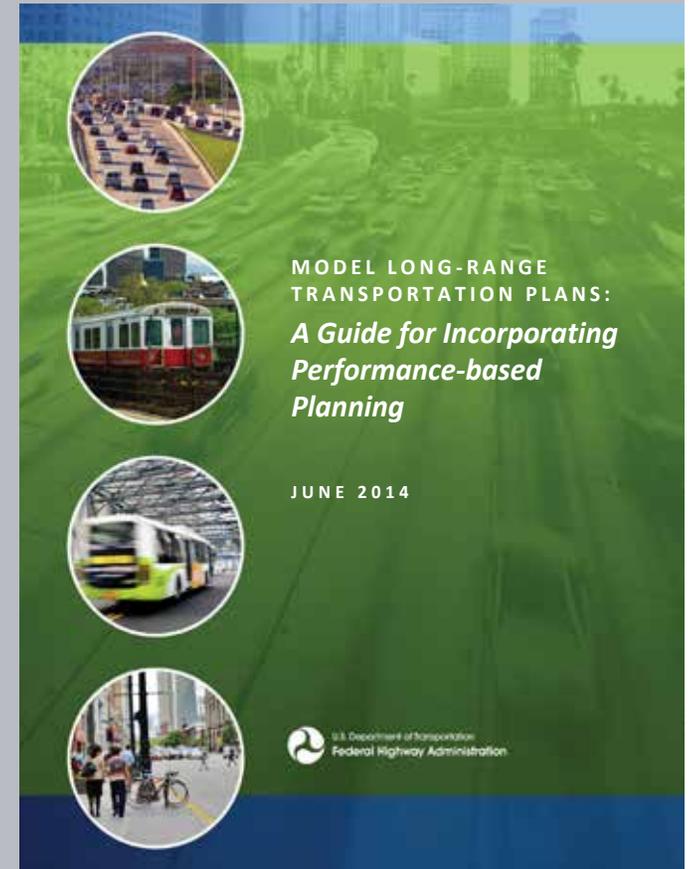
Different Transportation Plans and Programs

Before transportation planners start their work, the residents and officials of a region or State map out a long-term transportation vision. A vision includes broad goals that regions or States seek to achieve during the planning process.

To develop a vision, consider how you expect your region or State to change over the next several years. How will the following characteristics of your community change?

- Population
- Economy
- Safety
- The human and natural environment
- The unique needs of all available transportation modes
- Maintenance, operations, and management of transportation facilities
- Preservation of the human and natural environment
- Freight movement
- Sustainability
- Community livability and quality of life

After a region or State establishes goals for its vision, it develops proposed improvements to the transportation system based on those goals. Long-range plans outline transportation solutions that cover 20 or more years and account for how the transportation system will perform decades down the road to still meet the needs of all travelers.



Performance-based Planning

Performance-based planning emphasizes a deliberate, thoughtful, and structured approach that ensures transportation projects that are based on full information and benefit the public. This approach is often described as performance-based planning and programming (PBPP), and it typically follows these steps:

- **Where do we want to go?**
A broad vision that incorporates public input and sets overall goals.
- **How are we going to get there?**
Identify trends and targets to help planners compare alternative strategies based on data and information from similar past projects.
- **What will it take?**
The programming step selects specific investments to include in improvement plans, sometimes including mid-range, 10-year plans.
- **How did we do?**
Evaluate how well each option for a project meets its goals.

PBPP goals, performance measures, and investment priorities all stem from *your* visions for *your* community and *your* transportation needs.

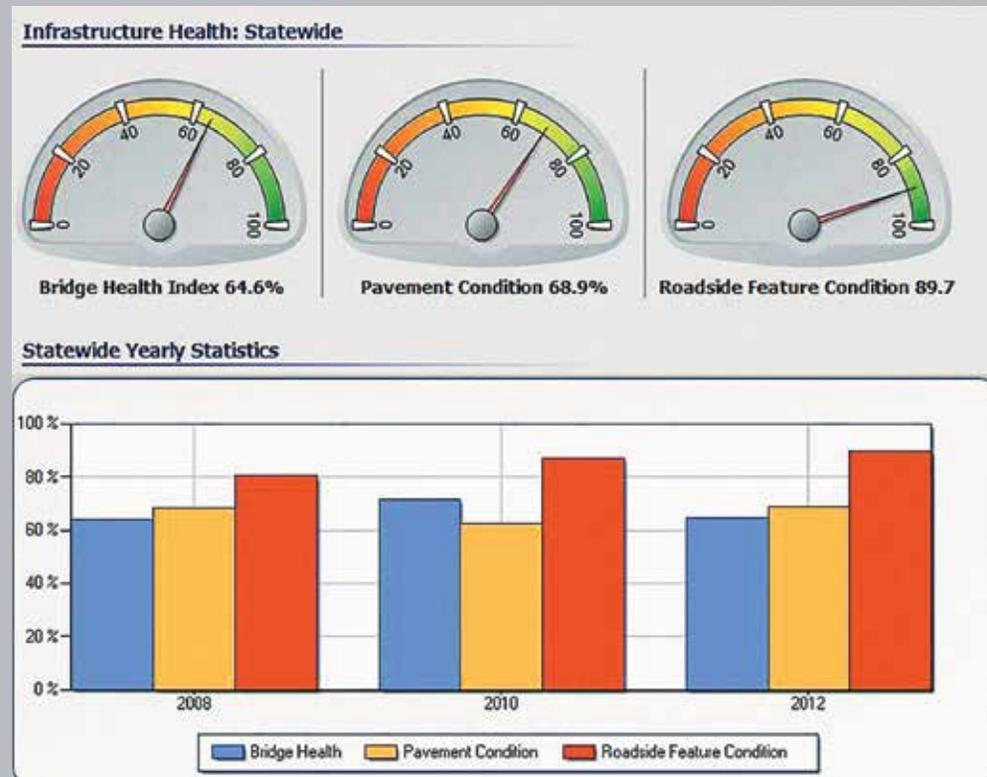


Image: North Carolina Department of Transportation Infrastructure Dashboard

Planning

Putting Plans in Place

Transportation planners help the public and elected officials translate visions into Metropolitan Transportation Plans in urbanized areas, and Long-Range Statewide Transportation Plans for entire states and rural areas. Planners work with the public and other agencies to pursue projects that make sense for their area and that best use limited funds. Planners often help facilitate public discussions, solicit public opinion, and use sophisticated computer models to predict future travel needs.

After regions or States develop their long-range plans, an MPO will develop its short-term program of projects, called a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which is updated every four years. Once the TIP is approved by the MPO, it is added without changes to the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). Each State develops a STIP consistent with the Long-Range Statewide Transportation Plan. The STIP describes all planned rural and urban area transportation system improvements.



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Funding Transportation Projects

Before improvements can be made to your area's transportation system, States and MPOs must identify project funds that will be reasonably available during the life of the TIP or STIP and the 20 years of the long-range transportation plan. Just as people budget funds for short- and long-term family and home expenses, MPOs and States plan funding for specific transportation projects. Since TIPs and STIPs describe the funds needed to make these transportation improvements possible, these programs must include affordable cost estimates. Projects that seek Federal funds must be included in the STIP.

Communities and the Environment in Transportation Planning

Transportation plans must not only reflect what communities want and need—they must also account for environmental impacts. In areas that do not meet national ambient air quality standards for certain transportation-related pollutants, the Clean Air Act requires that metropolitan transportation plans, TIPs, and FHWA/FTA projects conform with the purpose of the State's air quality implementation plan.

Your Role in the Planning Process

Community members often have unique and insightful perspectives on their transportation systems, and those perspectives may be very different from transportation officials'. That is why it is so important that you stay involved.

Transportation planning is an ongoing process and there are several ways to make transportation planners aware of your needs and concerns and to help develop solutions. The following efforts will ensure that you keep up with planning developments and have the opportunity to voice your opinions:

- Attend meetings of State and regional transportation boards.
- Volunteer to serve on a focus group or advisory committee.
- Ask a transportation official to attend a meeting of your community organization, such as the Rotary Club, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, American Association of Retired Persons, Kiwanis Club, or school board, and ask that official to explain transportation planning efforts in your region to you and your neighbors.
- Follow your MPO, State DOT, transit agency, and local government on social media.
- Contact your MPO, State DOT, transit agency, and local government to find out about public participation opportunities available in your area.
- Add your name and mailing address, or e-mail address, to a mailing list to receive newsletters, updates, and other information from your local government agencies, transit operators, MPO(s), State DOT(s) and Tribal Governments.

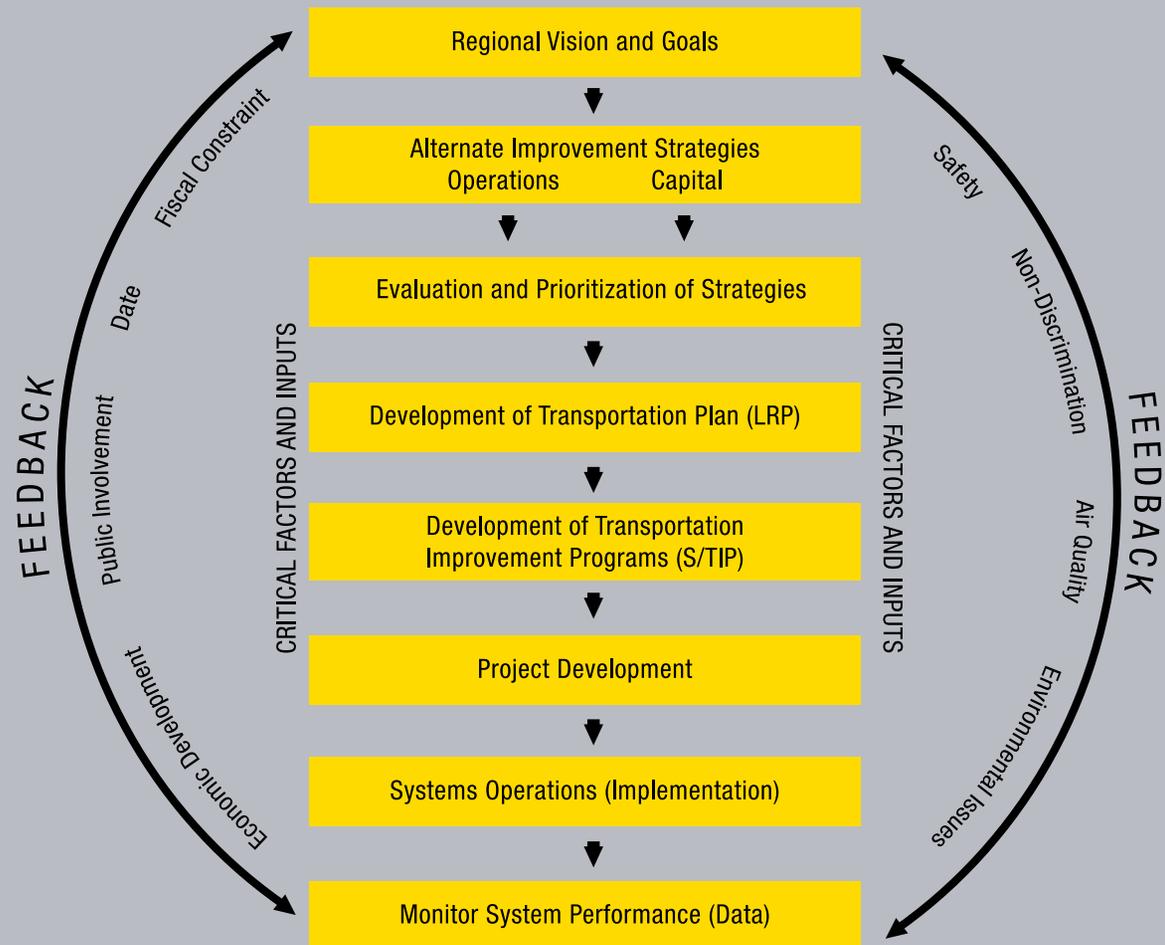


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The Transportation Planning Process

Remember that Metropolitan and Long-Range Statewide Transportation Plans, as well as Transportation Improvement Programs and Statewide Transportation Improvement Programs, are the key documents produced during transportation planning.

This chart shows the critical factors and inputs that guide transportation planning. Each factor is part of the transportation picture and is important to your community's future. Projects small and large follow the transportation planning process and you will always have the opportunity to review and comment on projects before they are approved by transportation officials. Get involved!



Project Development

After transportation planning is complete, transportation planning decisions transition into the *project development process*, which ensures that the project will be reviewed according to the principles of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Engineers then begin to design individual projects. Project development links the planning process with project locations, designs, construction, and operations.

Photo: © U.S. Department of Transportation



The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 requires that any activity or project receiving Federal funding or other Federal actions (including transportation projects) undergo a detailed analysis of potential impacts. Under NEPA, FHWA and FTA work closely with other Federal agencies and State, local, and Tribal governments, public and private organizations, and the public to understand the potential impacts of a proposed project. This process requires stakeholders to strike a delicate balance between many important factors, including mobility needs, economic prosperity, health and environmental protection, community and neighborhood preservation, and quality of life for present and future generations.

Goals of Project Development and the NEPA Process

Project development is an approach to balanced transportation decisionmaking. Before constructing a project, NEPA requirements make sure that planners account for potential impacts on the human and natural environment and the public's need for safe and efficient transportation.

Projects that advance through transportation planning are subject to even more examination to determine how they might impact the community, particularly the natural and human environment. Before any project can move forward to construction, FHWA and FTA will assess whether the project complies with more than 40 laws related to safety and the environment. These laws cover social, economic, and environmental (SEE) concerns ranging from community cohesion to the impact on threatened and endangered species. In order to complete this examination, FHWA and FTA use the process outlined in NEPA to evaluate SEE concerns with each project.

Documenting Decisions



Project Development Goals and the NEPA Process

When projects are documented the public can provide input based on current and accurate materials provided by an MPO or State DOT.

FHWA and FTA prepare official documents to meet NEPA and other legal requirements based on projected impacts. State DOTs and transit agencies also prepare NEPA documentation. The documents used in the process are described below.

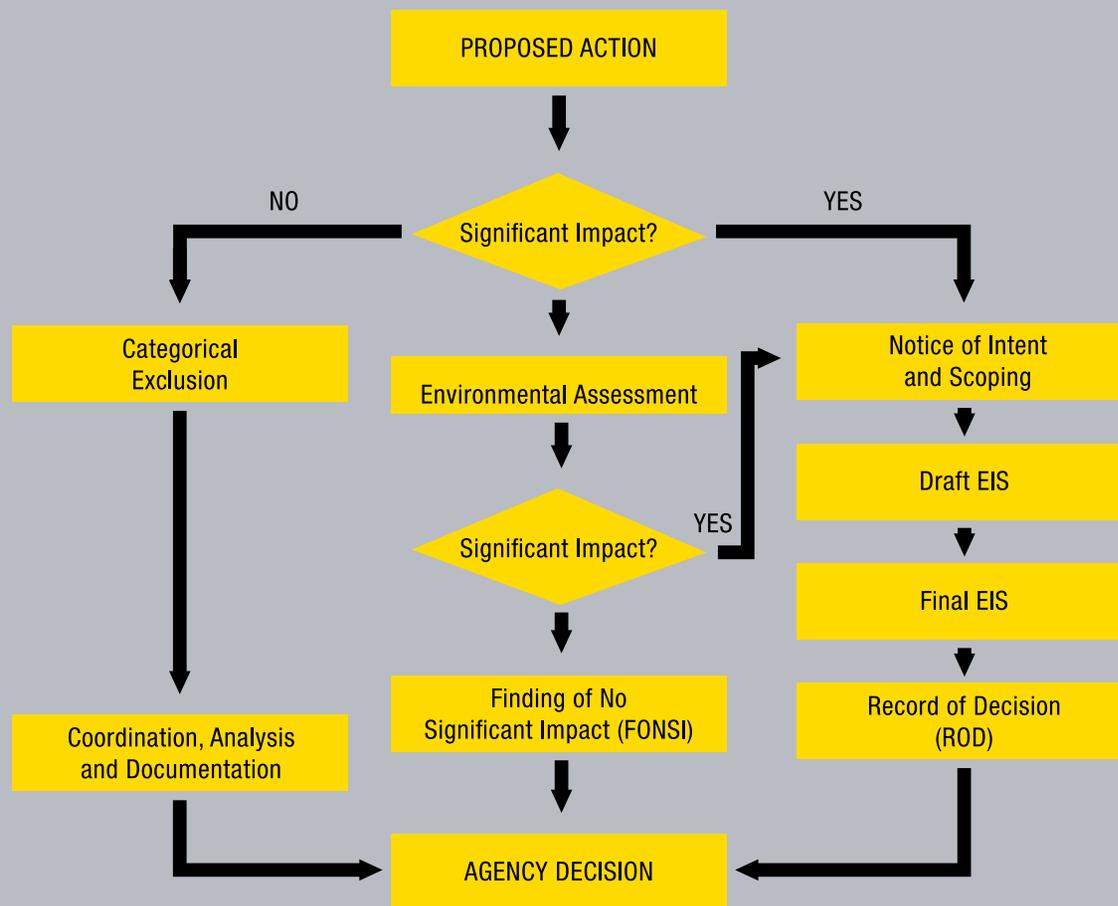
Categorical Exclusions (CEs) are prepared for Federal projects that have been determined to not have a significant individual or cumulative effect on the human environment, the natural environment, or both.

Environmental Assessments (EAs) are prepared when it is unclear how significant environmental impacts might be. If the project's impact is determined to be insignificant, a Finding of No Significant Impact is documented.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is a document indicating that a project was found to have no significant impacts on the quality of the human and natural environment and that an environmental impact statement will not need to be prepared.

Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) are prepared when it is known a project will have a significant effect on the human environment, the natural environment, or both.

Draft EIS (DEIS) and **Final EIS (FEIS)** are disclosure documents that provide a full description of the proposed project, the existing environment, and analysis of



the anticipated beneficial and adverse environmental effects of a range of reasonable alternatives to the proposed project.*

A **Record of Decision (ROD)** states the reasons for the project decision, other alternatives considered, mitigation adopted for the selected alternative or choice, and any Section 4(f) approvals. Section 4(f) helps protect wildlife refuges and public areas and is part of the statute that created USDOT.

In preparing one of the three levels of NEPA documentation—CE, EA, or EIS—FHWA and FTA must consider all potential significant environmental impacts, provide the opportunity for public involvement and input, and work with other Federal, State, Tribal, and local agencies to consider their interests.

Although the size and complexity of NEPA documentations are different, they all serve the same purpose—to achieve better decisions by involving you, the public, in making community-sensitive transportation decisions.

* Under current Federal legislation, agencies may issue a combined FEIS and ROD.



Your Role in the Project Development Process

Your participation in transportation planning is key to identifying solutions that are appropriate for your community. You can play an important role in the project development process by sharing your perspective on the history, issues, and priorities of your local area. It is critical that you express your views and ideas about proposed transportation solutions during the planning and project development process. Agencies will consider your input along with input from other individuals, groups, and agencies to make project decisions that are most in line with the overall public interest and that meet all applicable laws and regulations.

Remember, NEPA takes into account the potential impacts on the human and natural environment and the public's need for safe and efficient transportation. Perhaps you can recommend ways to avoid, lessen, or compensate for an impact. This is called **mitigation**. Or, maybe you can recommend some special or additional features that may benefit your community. These are called **enhancements**. Mitigation and enhancement are discussed during the planning and project-development process.

Get involved early in order to have the greatest impact on how transportation planners develop solutions. As with the transportation planning process, stay involved by putting your name on project mailing lists and following social media, attending public meetings, and inviting transportation officials to community meetings. During project development an advisory committee may be formed to give the community direct access to project staff. On large projects, you can expect the sponsoring agency to hold public hearings, meetings, or workshops within the project area.



You can help your planning organization and State DOT develop ways to gather and incorporate community input. If you have ideas about better ways to reach community groups, contact your MPO and State DOT.

You Can Make a Difference

Your input, verbal or written, is essential to transportation decisionmaking and can shape your community's quality of life. The earlier you get involved, the more influence you will have.

We want you and your family to get to and from work, school, and play as safely and efficiently as possible. Please, help us to serve you better.

Visit www.planning.dot.gov/overview.asp to find contact information for your local MPO.

Visit Our Websites

To get involved, visit our websites and contact your local FHWA and FTA offices, local transportation planning organization, or State DOT.

Planning

FHWA: www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning

FTA: www.fta.dot.gov/planning_environment.html

NEPA

FHWA: www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/index.asp

FTA: www.fta.dot.gov/planning/planning_environment_5222.html

Public Involvement

FHWA: www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/public_involvement

FTA: www.fta.dot.gov/planning/environment/planning_environment_226.html

FHWA – FTA Transportation Planning Capacity Building Program

Public Engagement Focus Page: www.planning.dot.gov



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Glossary

Advisory Committee — A group of representative stakeholders who meet regularly to discuss common concerns, such as transportation, land use, and environmental topics, and to advise agency officials. These groups interact and communicate with residents and government. Advisory committees are usually housed within MPOs and State DOTs.

Americans With Disabilities Act — Gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities, similar to protections provided to individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, State and local government services, and telecommunications.

Categorical Exclusion (CE) — A document prepared for Federal actions that do not individually or cumulatively have a significant human or natural environmental impact. A Categorical Exclusion does not require an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement.

Environmental Assessment (EA) — An interim decision document prepared when the significance of social, economic, or environmental impact has not yet been clearly established. If the action is determined to have significant impact, an Environmental Impact Statement is prepared. If no significant impact is determined, an environmental document called a Finding of No Significant Impact is prepared.

Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) — A document, required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), prepared for an action that is likely to have significant impact. This document summarizes the major environmental impacts, outlines issues, examines reasonable alternatives, and arrives at a record of decision identifying the selected alternative for the project.

Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) — An agency of the United States Department of Transportation. FHWA administers the Federal-aid Highway Program, which provides financial

assistance to States to construct and improve highways, urban and rural roads, and bridges. FHWA also administers the Federal Lands Highway Program, which provides funding to support improved access to and within national forests, national parks, Tribal lands, and other federally owned and managed public lands. FHWA is headquartered in Washington, DC, with field offices across the country, including one in or near each State capital.

Federal Surface Transportation Legislation — Federal laws that authorize funds and programs for highway, transit, and other surface transportation programs. These funds are derived primarily through gas taxes.

Federal Transit Administration (FTA) — An agency of the United States Department of Transportation. FTA is the principal source of Federal financial assistance to America's communities for the planning, development, and improvement of public or mass transportation systems. FTA provides leadership, technical assistance, and financial resources for safe, technologically advanced public transportation that enhances mobility and accessibility, improves the nation's communities and natural environment, and strengthens the national economy. FTA is headquartered in Washington, DC, with regional offices in Atlanta, Cambridge, Chicago, Denver, Fort Worth, Kansas City, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Seattle. Each of these regional offices interact with a group of several state DOTs and the transit agencies in each of the States within the defined region.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) — A statement indicating that a project was found to have no significant impacts on the quality of the human and natural environment and that a formal environmental impact statement will not need to be prepared.

Lead agency — Refers to the Department of Transportation and, if applicable, any State or local governmental entity serving as a joint lead agency.

Long-Range Statewide Transportation Plan — A document resulting from the Statewide process of collaboration and consensus regarding transportation systems across the State and

for rural areas of the State. This document serves as the defining vision for the region's or State's transportation systems and services.

Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) — A forum for regional planning, collaboration, and decisionmaking in metropolitan areas of at least 50,000 people. MPOs conduct the regional transportation planning process.

Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) — The official intermodal long-range (20-year) transportation plan that is developed and adopted through the metropolitan transportation planning process for the metropolitan planning area.

Mitigation — A means of avoiding, minimizing, rectifying, or reducing an impact, and, in some cases, compensating for an impact.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) — A law enacted in 1969 that established a national environmental policy. For any project using Federal funding or requiring Federal approval, including transportation projects, NEPA requires the examination of the environmental effects of the proposed project, and alternatives on both the natural and man-made environments, and that this process be completed before a Federal decision is made.

Project Development — A detailed analysis of a proposed project's social, economic, and environmental impacts and various project alternatives. During project development, which happens after the planning process, all affected parties, including the public, reach a decision through negotiation. After a proposal has successfully completed project development it may move into the preliminary engineering, design, and construction phases.

Public Hearing — A formal event held before a decision is made to gather community comments, ideas, and concerns from the public and all interested parties. Comments are entered into public record and, as appropriate, incorporated into decisions.

Public Meeting — A formal or informal event designed for a specific issue or community group during which planners present information and receive input from community residents.

Record of Decision (ROD) — A concise decision document for an environmental impact statement that states the decision (a selected choice or alternative), other alternatives considered, and mitigation adopted for the selected choice or alternative.

State Department of Transportation (State DOT) — A Statewide agency responsible for conducting transportation planning activities in non-metropolitan areas of the State, and assisting MPOs with transportation planning for metropolitan areas. State DOTs are also responsible for developing, designing, and constructing projects, as well as managing, operating and maintaining most of the public highway network in their States.

Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) — Prepared by State DOTs, the STIP is a staged, multiyear—typically 4-year—list of projects proposed for Federal, State, and local funding across the State. It is a compilation of the TIPs prepared by metropolitan areas, as well as State DOT-developed project information for non-metropolitan or rural areas and for transportation between cities.

Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) — Provides funding for programs and projects, including on- and off-road pedestrian and bicycle facilities; infrastructure projects for improving non-driver access to public transportation; enhanced mobility, community improvement activities; environmental mitigation; recreational trail program projects; safe routes to school projects; and projects for planning, designing, or constructing boulevards and other roadways largely in the right-of-way of former Interstate System routes or other divided highways.

Transportation System — Encompasses all transportation elements in a community, including roads, bridges, bicycle and pedestrian paths, buses, subways, light rail, commuter rail, monorail, passenger ferryboats, trolleys, and inclined railways.

Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) — A staged, multiyear (typically 4-year) listing of surface transportation projects proposed for Federal, State, and local funding in a metropolitan area. MPOs are required to prepare a TIP as a short-range programming document to complement their long-range multimodal transportation plan.

Transportation Planning — A continuing, collaborative, and comprehensive process of examining demographic characteristics and travel patterns for a given area. Transportation planning examines how these characteristics will change over a period of time, evaluates alternatives for an area's transportation system, and assesses the most effective use of local, State, and Federal transportation funding. Long-range planning is typically done over a period of 20 years; short-range programming of specific projects usually covers 4 years.



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