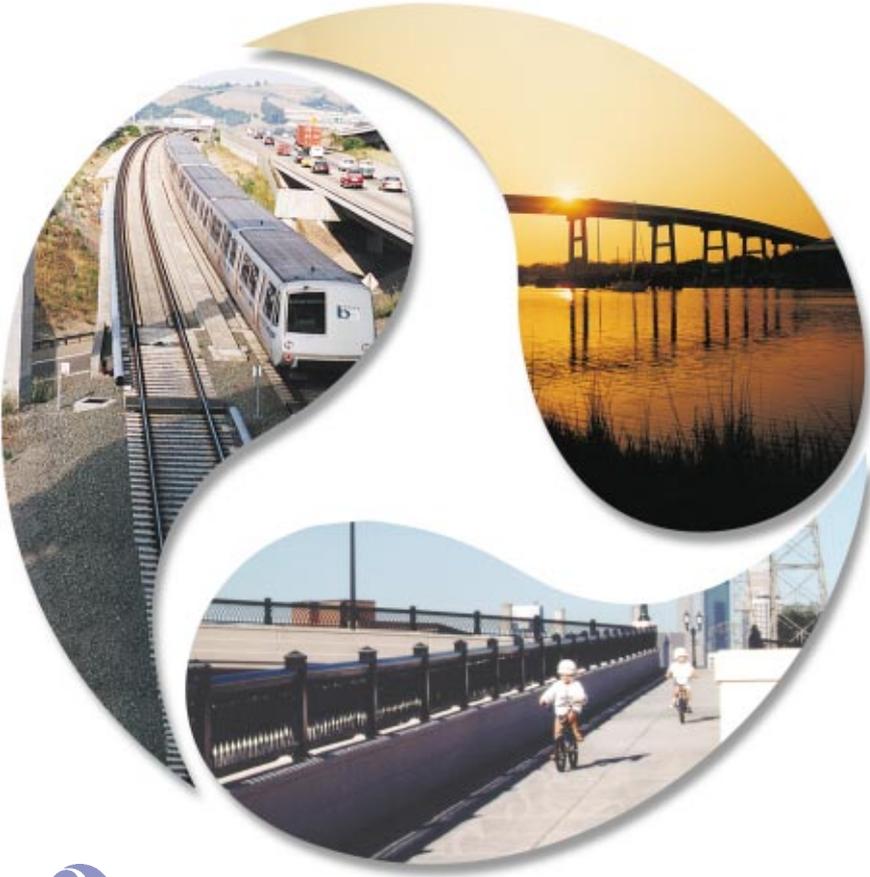


a citizen's guide to

Transportation

Decisionmaking



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



A Citizen's Guide to Transportation Decisionmaking



Introduction

Have you ever wondered how decisions are made about transportation projects that affect your life? How do government officials decide where to put a bus stop, road, or bridge? How are these and other transportation projects planned? And how can you make sure your opinions are heard and considered by the planners, road designers, elected officials, and other citizens?

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) wrote this guide to give you the answers to these and other transportation-related questions. We hope this guide will help you understand how transportation decisions are made at the local, state, and national levels. We believe that the better citizens understand the transportation decisionmaking process, the more certain it is we will have a transportation system that is safe, efficient, and responsive to public needs and concerns about their communities and the natural environment.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) are part of the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT).

USDOT is a federal government agency that funds, sets policy for safety, and provides other guidance for transportation by air, highways, rail, transit, and water.



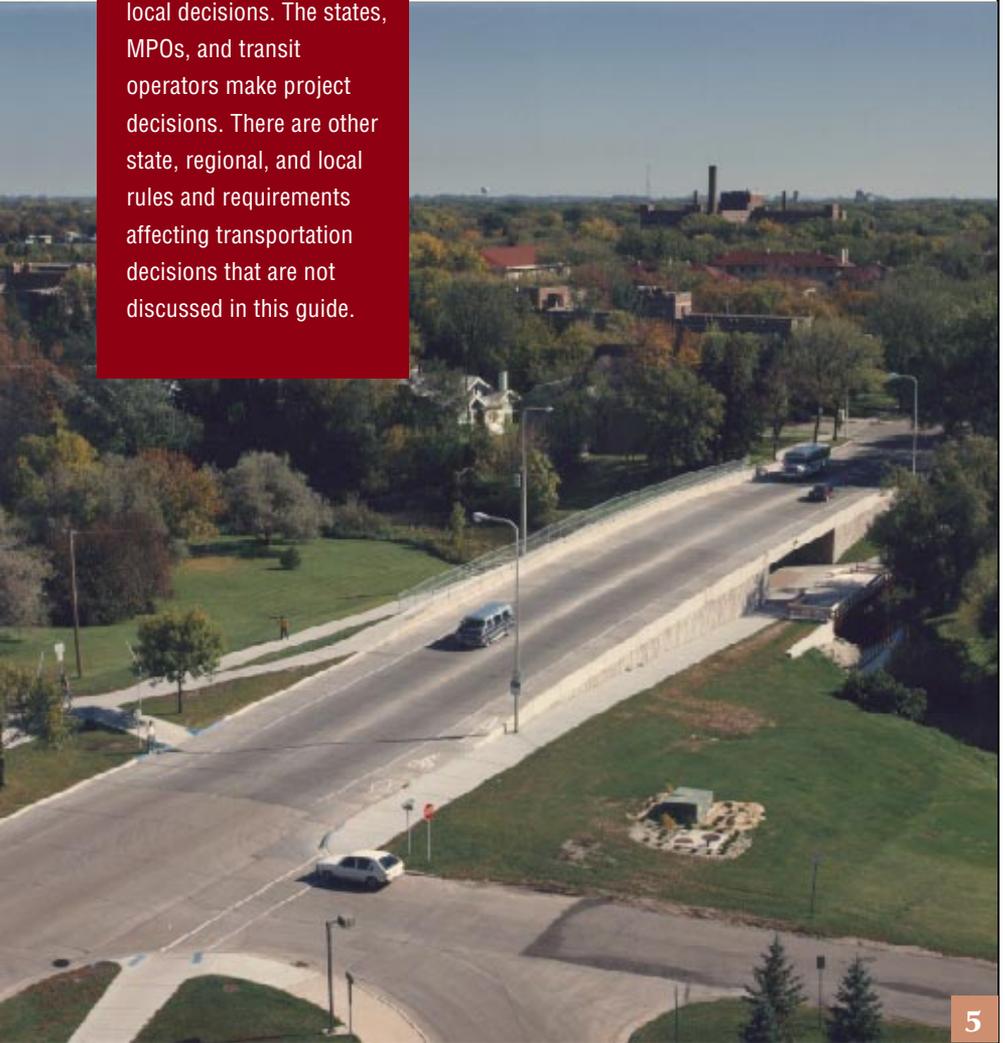
How the Decisionmaking Starts

For many of us, transportation projects seem to come from nowhere. Others may vaguely remember a project “promised” years ago. Too often, too many people have negative impressions of how transportation projects come about.

Instead, try comparing the transportation decisionmaking process to the creative process for producing a piece of pottery. The potter begins with a mass of clay and an idea for the final creation—but as the mass begins to take shape, there are changes and adjustments that have to be made, with some clay added here and there. You, the public, are involved in the shaping and adding to make the creation as beautiful and useful as possible. We, at the FHWA and FTA, want, and look forward to, your involvement from the beginning to the end of each transportation project.

Transportation affects almost every aspect of a person’s life. With your help, the FHWA and FTA can do our part to keep the U.S. transportation system one of the safest and most efficient in the world! We also want the system to be one of the most community and environmentally friendly as well. Please read this guide, and contact us with any questions you may have.

This guide only discusses federal requirements for the transportation decisionmaking process. The federal role is to provide funds, standards, and planning for state and local decisions. The states, MPOs, and transit operators make project decisions. There are other state, regional, and local rules and requirements affecting transportation decisions that are not discussed in this guide.



The Basics of Transportation Decisionmaking

Imagine any ground transportation: train, car, bicycle, wheelchair, or foot. Now, think about your favorite way to travel. Which would you use to get to your destination? Are you satisfied with your choice? Will you have any problems using this method? Would you like more options?

The process of identifying transportation problems and looking for solutions to those problems is called transportation planning.

Transportation planning is the job of professionals who study and work out the best ways to get you to . . .

- where you live,
 - where you work,
 - where you shop,
 - where your kids go to school,
 - where you take vacations, and
- . . . anywhere else you need to go.



Transportation professionals place a high priority on getting you to and from your destinations safely and on time. They are also committed to preserving our communities and farms, and keeping our air and water clean.

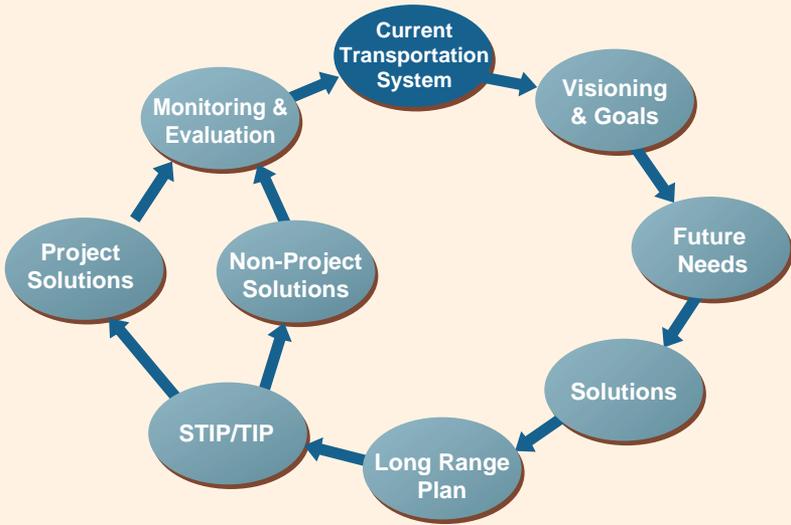
Transportation decisionmaking looks for ways to solve current transportation problems while avoiding future problems. Transportation planners try to figure out how to get you to and from your destination safely and on time—not only today, but also 5, 10, and even 20 years from now. To give you the best transportation choices, transportation planners work with many different public and private groups that provide housing, schools, jobs, and parks.



The Government and Transportation Decisionmaking

Transportation decisionmaking is carried out by several governmental levels:

- **State Departments of Transportation (DOTs)** are the largest units of government that develop transportation plans and projects. They are responsible for setting the transportation goals for the state. To do so, they work with all of the state's transportation organizations and local governments. They are responsible for planning safe and efficient transportation between cities and towns in the state.
- **Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs)** represent areas with a population of 50,000 people or more. An MPO may have "council of governments" or "regional planning commission" in its official name. Each MPO is different because individual metropolitan areas are so different. A policy board, which is comprised of local elected officials, set an MPO's policy; but other groups, such as non-profit organizations, community organizations, or environmental organizations, can influence the direction an MPO follows. The MPOs' mission is to provide short and long-term solutions to transportation and transportation-related concerns.



- **Local governments** carry out many transportation planning functions, such as scheduling improvements and maintenance for local streets and roads.
- **Transit agencies** are public and private 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.
- The **Federal Government (U.S. DOT)** reviews the transportation planning and project activities of the MPOs and state DOTs. The federal government also provides advice and training on transportation topics, ranging from pavement technology to design to efficient operations of highway and transit systems. The federal government also supplies critical funding needed for transportation planning and projects. At least every two years, the federal government approves projects planned for construction by the state and other state agencies using federal funds.

Different Transportation Plans and Programs

Before transportation planners start, the citizens and officials of a region or a state must have a long-term vision for transportation in that area. A vision plan provides broad goals for what the region or state will look like and reflects what is important for the future.

To develop a vision, you need to consider several characteristics of your region, state, or metropolitan area—and how you expect these characteristics to change over the next several years. Here are some characteristics to consider:

- Projected population growth
- Projected economic changes
- Current and future transportation needs (air, bicycle, bus, rail, roads, pedestrian, and water)
- Safety
- Maintenance of transportation facilities
- Preserving the human and natural environment
- Quality of life



Some transportation plans focus strictly on transportation, while others are more general, with transportation just one part of a larger plan for green space, parks, and other uses. Transportation planning processes often are complicated because of the need to cover entire state and metropolitan transportation systems. A state plan will also include regional, metropolitan, and other local transportation plans.



Once you have reviewed and established the goals for your vision, you have a foundation for plans to improve the transportation system for your area. These long-range plans provide transportation solutions that cover 20 or more years. The solutions can range from a new traffic signal system to a pedestrian pathway or a new bus line to a completely new road project.

Putting the Plans in Place

Transportation planners help the public and elected officials translate the vision into long-range transportation plans. Planners look at different transportation alternatives and work with the public to select the alternatives that make the most sense for their areas. Sometimes they use mathematical models to predict future travel; sometimes they lead public discussions to get the opinion of the public and experts.

These transportation solutions must be able to keep the air quality of a state or region safe for all people in the community. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sets maximum safe amounts of pollution that a region or state can have in the air. How much pollution is allowed from cars, trucks, and buses to the air will vary depending on the area's climate, wind, and other pollution sources and factors.



Usually, the first product after the long-range plan is a **Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)** or an MPOs' **Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)**. These improvement programs are usually developed on a 3-year cycle. They contain individual transportation improvements and projects. All projects must be part of an improvement program to be implemented. The following chart illustrates which organizations tend to use the various plans and projects:

Plan Use by Organization				
Organization	Vision Planning	Long-range Plans	TIPs	Project Planning
State DOTs	✓	✓	✓	✓
MPOs	✓	✓	✓	
Transit Agencies			✓	✓
City/Local Trans. Dept.			✓	✓

Funding Transportation Projects

Before states and MPOs can make improvements in your area's transportation system, they must identify funds that will be readily available over the three-to-five-year life of the Transportation Improvement Program. Just as an individual would budget money for short-term family and home expenses, MPOs and states allocate funds for specific transportation projects. STIPs and TIPs are important documents for budgeting the funds needed to make these transportation improvements possible.



Communities and the Environment in Transportation Planning

Transportation planning must reflect the desires of communities, and take into account the impacts on both the natural and human environments. Moreover, transportation plans should help your regions and communities reach their goals. As previously mentioned, a project must be included in a TIP for it to be funded, and plans and programs must comply with air quality standards established by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).



Your Role in the Planning Process

So how do you fit into the transportation planning process? Your role in the process is very important. Without your input—your ideas—state and local governments cannot have a true understanding of your community’s needs.

Although some people may think that transportation officials can get all needed information on their own, that is not the case. You may know information that is more current or detailed than is available to transportation professionals. You may also see things differently than transportation officials. This is why it is so important for you to be involved.

The transportation planning process is ongoing, nonstop, and can take many years, so there are several ways to make transportation planners aware of your needs and concerns, and also help develop transportation solutions. To make sure that you are following the latest developments, you can:





- **Put your name on a mailing list** to receive newsletters, updates and other information from the MPOs and State DOTs.
- **Attend meetings** of local transportation boards.
- **Provide your input** on transportation plans.
- **Volunteer to serve** on a citizen focus group or citizens' advisory committee.
- **Ask a transportation official** to attend your rotary clubs, NAACP, Kiwanis clubs, community organizations, schools, and other civic organizations and explain the process.
- **Find out** what specific public involvement opportunities are available in your area by contacting your MPO, State DOT, transit agency, local government, and federal government.

Remember that vision plans, long-range transportation plans, and transportation improvement programs are the key documents that come from transportation planning. These documents are used to build the foundation for individual transportation projects. They are all part of the big transportation picture and are important to your transportation future. Get involved!

Project Development

The next step after transportation planning is **project development**, which is also known as **project planning** in many areas. Project development occurs on individual projects, ranging in size from small (such as new lane striping) to very large (for example, a new transit project or highway). But whether small or large, most projects must first go through the transportation planning process, appear in the TIP and/or STIP, have some citizen involvement, and be approved by transportation officials. The project development process is critical because it links the planning process with the actual project location, design, and eventual construction.





Goals of Project Development and the NEPA Process

The goals of the project development stage are to find out where a project is located and what it looks like.

Projects that come through a transportation planning process will eventually be closely looked at to see how they might impact the community, the natural environment, and our health and welfare. Before any project can move forward to construction, the FHWA and FTA may address and comply 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 threatened and endangered species. To get through this detailed process, FHWA and FTA use the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process to evaluate all SEE concerns with each individual project.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), enacted in 1969, requires that any activity or project receiving federal funding or other federal approvals (including transportation projects) undergo this 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 a project's impact. This process involves striking a delicate balance among many different factors—mobility needs, economic prosperity, health and environmental protection, community and neighborhood preservation, and quality of life for present and future generations.



Documenting Decisions

It is important for government officials to carefully evaluate the choices available to them when making transportation decisions. This is why FHWA and FTA (along with your state DOT) always document their work and decisions

for the public and for government agencies to review and provide input. We prepare documents before and after decisions are made so everyone can see why the decisions were made and can also provide input.

In addition to the documentation just mentioned, FHWA and FTA also prepare documents to meet NEPA requirements. Since every transportation project is different, and some are more complex than others, FHWA and FTA prepare one or more of the following documents for a proposed project to conform with NEPA requirements:

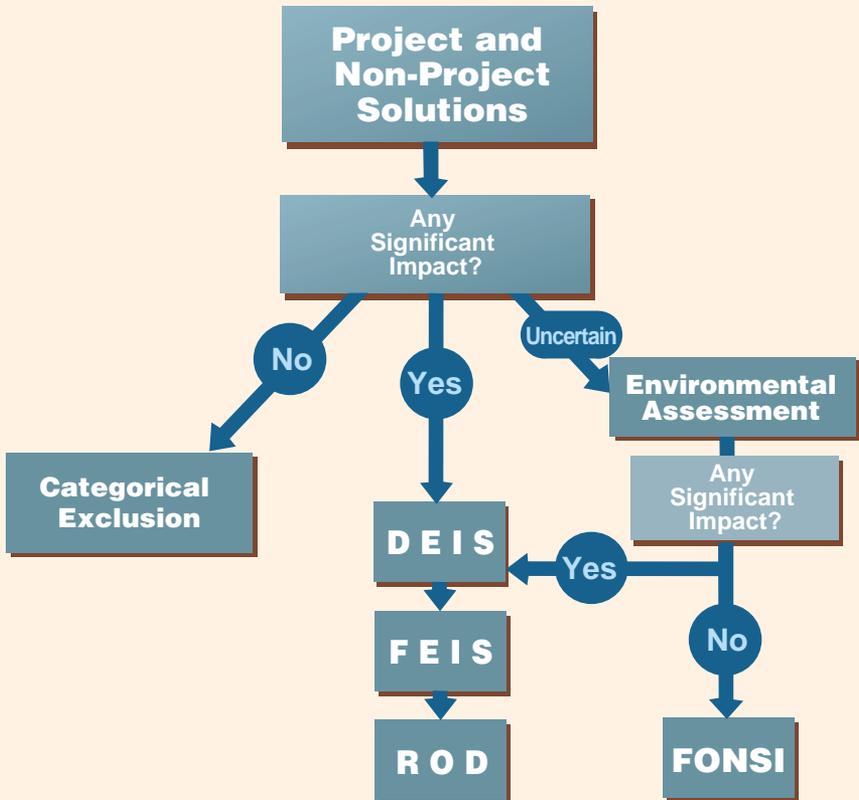


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- **Environmental Impact Statements (EIS)** are prepared for federal actions that have a significant effect on the human and natural environment.
 - **Draft EIS (DEIS)** and **Final EIS (FEIS)** are disclosure documents that provide a full description of the proposed project, the existing environment, and analysis of the anticipated beneficial and adverse environmental effects of all reasonable alternatives.
 - **Categorical Exclusions (CE)** are prepared for federal actions that do not have a significant human and natural environmental effect.
 - **Environmental Assessments (EA)** are prepared for federal actions where it is not clearly known how significant the environmental impact might be. If, after preparing an Environmental Assessment, it is determined that the project's impact is significant, an Environmental Impact Statement is then prepared. If not, a finding of "no significant impact" is documented.
 - **Record of Decision (ROD)** is a concise decision document for an environmental impact statement that states the decision (selected alternative or choice), other alternatives considered, and mitigation adopted for the selected alternative or choice.
 - **Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)** is a statement indicating that a project was found to have no significant impacts on the quality of the human environment and for which an environmental statement will therefore not be prepared.

In preparing an EIS, CE or EA for projects, FHWA and FTA must consider all of the relevant SEE impacts and pursue public involvement. In considering the potential SEE impacts of a project or activity, FHWA and FTA work with other federal, state and local agencies to consider their interests.

Although the size and complexity of the three levels of NEPA documentation are different, they all serve the same purpose—to achieve better decisions by making the impact of choices known and by involving you, the public, in making transportation decisions.

Project Development Process



Your Role in Project Development

Your participation in each step of the transportation planning process is key to finding good solutions. You also have an important role in project development. You will have history and knowledge about your local area that transportation officials might not have, and you know what is important to you about your community. Your views and ideas about proposed transportation solutions at the project development stage are critical.

Remember, project development is about finding a location and developing a design for how the project will look and work. Perhaps you can recommend ways to avoid, lessen, or compensate for an impact. We call this **mitigation**. Or you may be able to recommend some special or additional features that may benefit your community. These are called **enhancements**. Mitigation and enhancements are discussed during project development.

Just as with transportation planning, you should get your name put on the project mailing list, attend meetings, and invite a transportation official to your meetings. During this phase, a **citizens advisory committee** may be formed to give the community direct access to the project staff and input to the process. On larger projects, you can expect the sponsoring agency to have public hearings, meetings and/or workshops in the project area.

You can help your planning organization and State DOT develop methods to get your viewpoint. If there are better ways to reach your groups, please let us know.

We recommend that you get involved early to have the greatest impact on developing transportation solutions. Your input, whether verbal or written, is needed early in the transportation decisionmaking process to help shape the quality of life for your community.

You Can Make a Difference

You are essential to the transportation decisionmaking process. The earlier you get involved, the greater your influence will be.

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

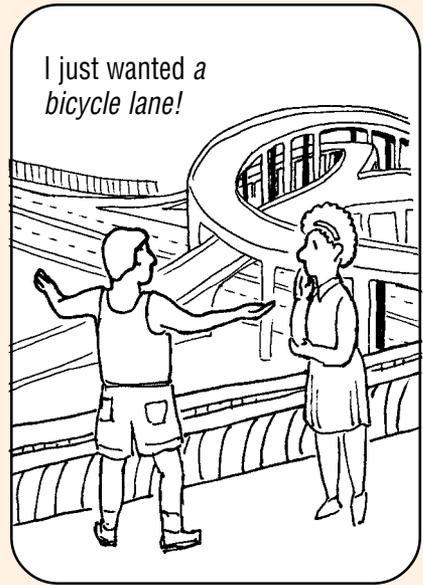
Thank you!

To find out where you can get involved, contact your FHWA and FTA office, local transportation planning organization, or State Department of Transportation.

The transportation decisionmaking process is like a train with a certain number of stops.

What if three people board at every stop, and each person gets a vote on where the train should stop. The longer you wait to board and vote, the harder it will be to influence the train route.

It is possible to influence a project outcome from the start. It is more difficult when you join the process in the latter stages.



VISIT OUR WEBSITES

Planning

FHWA www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/planning.htm

FTA www.fta.dot.gov/office/planning

NEPA

FHWA www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/nepa.htm

FTA www.fta.dot.gov/office/planning/envr.htm

Public Involvement

FHWA www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/pubinv2.htm

FTA www.fta.dot.gov/office/planning/pi.htm

Glossary

Citizens Advisory Committee—representative stakeholders that meet regularly to discuss issues of common concern, such as transportation, and to advise sponsoring agency officials. These groups effectively interact between citizens and their government.

Categorical Exclusion (CE)—an action that does not individually or cumulatively have a significant impact on the human environment. This Categorical Exclusion does not require an Environmental Assessment nor an Environmental Impact Statement.

Enhancements—activities that assist communities reach social, cultural, aesthetic and environmental goals as well as help harmonize the transportation system with the community. Enhancements are part of the mitigation for project impacts and can include bike and pedestrian trails, renovating streetscapes, and scenic beautification.

Environmental Assessment (EA)—an interim decision document prepared for an action where the significance of social, economic, or environmental impact is not clearly established. If the action is determined to have significant impact, an Environmental Impact Statement is then prepared. If no significant impact is determined, a finding of no significant impact is prepared.

Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)—a document, required under the National Environmental Policy Act, 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)—a branch of the United States Department of Transportation that administers the Federal-aid Highway Program, providing financial assistance to states to construct and improve highways, urban and rural roads, and bridges. The FHWA also administers the Federal Lands Highway Program that provides access to and within national forests, national parks, Indian reservations and other public lands. The FHWA is headquartered in Washington, DC, with field offices across the country, including one in each state capital.

Federal Transit Administration (FTA)—a branch of the United States Department of Transportation that 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 to enhance mobility and accessibility, to improve the nation's communities and natural environment, and to strengthen the national economy. The FTA is headquartered in Washington, DC, with regional offices in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Kansas City, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Seattle.

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 environment and for which an environmental statement will therefore not be prepared.

Long-Range Transportation Plan—a document resulting from a regional or statewide process of collaboration and consensus on a region or state’s transportation system. This document serves as the defining vision for the region’s or state’s transportation systems and services. In metropolitan areas, the plan indicates all of the transportation improvement scheduled for funding over the next 20 years.

Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)—a forum for regional planning, collaboration, and decisionmaking, MPOs are designated agencies for metropolitan areas larger than 50,000 in population that conduct regional transportation planning.

Mitigation—means to avoid, minimize, rectify, or reduce an impact, and in some cases, to compensate for an impact.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)—a law enacted in 1969 that established a national environmental policy requiring that any project using federal funding or approval, including transportation projects, examine the effects the proposal and alternative choices have on the environment before a federal decision is made.

Project Development—the phase a proposed project undergoes once it has been through the planning process. The project development phase is a more detailed analysis of a proposed project’s social, economic, and environmental impacts and various project alternatives. What comes from the project development phase is a decision reached through negotiation among all affected parties, including the public. After a proposal has successfully passed the project development phase, it may move to preliminary engineering, design, and construction.

Public Hearing—a formal event held prior to a decision that gathers community comments and positions from all interested parties for public record and input into decisions.

Public Meeting—a formal or informal event designed for a specific issue or community group where information is presented and input from community residents is received.

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

State Department of Transportation (State DOT)—a statewide agency that is responsible for conducting transportation planning activities in non-metropolitan areas of the state, and assisting MPOs in transportation planning for the metropolitan areas. State DOTs are also responsible for developing, designing, and constructing most of the projects on major highways in most states.

Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)—prepared by the State DOTs, the STIP is a staged, multiyear listing of projects proposed for federal, state, and local funding encompassing the entire state. It is a compilation of the TIPs (see TIP) prepared for the metropolitan areas, as well as project information for the non-metropolitan areas of the state and for transportation between cities.

Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21)—a law enacted in 1998, TEA-21 authorized federal funding for transportation investment for the time period spanning fiscal year 1998 to fiscal year 2003. Approximately \$218 billion in funding was authorized, the largest amount in history, and is used for highway, transit, and other surface transportation programs.

Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)—a staged, multiyear (typically three to five years) listing of surface transportation projects proposed for federal, state, and local funding within a metropolitan area. MPOs are required to prepare a TIP as a short-range programming document to complement its long-range transportation plan. TIPs contain projects with committed funds over a multiyear period.

Transportation Planning—a collaborative process of examining demographic characteristics and travel patterns for a given area. This process shows how these characteristics will change over a given period of time, and evaluates alternatives for the transportation system of the area and the most expeditious use of local, state, and federal transportation funding. Long-range planning is typically done over a period of twenty years; short-range programming of specific projects usually covers a period of three to five years.



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