

Planning and Environmental Linkages: Phase I Survey Summary

Oregon Department of Transportation
Geo-Environmental Section
4040 Fairview Industrial Drive
SE MS #6
Salem, OR 97302-1142

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List of Acronyms

CETAS—Collaborative Environmental and Transportation Agreement for Streamlining

EPM—Environmental Project Manager

EIS—Environmental Impact Statement

FHWA—Federal Highway Administration

FTA—Federal Transit Administration

IAMP—Interchange Area Management Plan

NEPA—National Environmental Policy Act

ODOT—Oregon Department of Transportation

PEL—Planning and Environmental Linkages

SDIC—Systematic Development of Informed Consent

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) have increased direction toward integrating transportation planning and environmental processes. Several Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) Regions already apply project- and program-level initiatives that integrate environmental process requirements into planning efforts. The intent of this project is to gain perspective and expert guidance toward developing a coordinated statewide approach to streamlining the linkage between planning and environmental processes.

An interagency task force was implemented to identify priorities and actions currently in use and summarize suggestions for improvement. A Working Committee was tasked with questioning internal and external sources including ODOT personnel, contractors, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) practitioners, legal advisors and resource agency staff to gain insight on methods and practices currently being used and problems encountered when linking planning and environmental analyses. Information gained from these contacts will be used to as input for recognizing best practice strategies for integration.

Phase I Summary

Phase I of this project was conducted during spring 2009 and involved an online survey distributed to ODOT Environmental Project Managers (EPMs), Regional Planners, Project Leaders, and various management positions. Surveys were completed by nine ODOT practitioners. The intent of the Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) Phase I interview was to develop information that would help ODOT practitioners better link the planning and environmental processes.

Questions 1–14 asked respondents to describe the types of projects they had participated in and their level of involvement and to relate methods, roadblocks, and successes. Responses to these questions suggest that successful integration depends, in part, on the scope of the planning exercise. More respondents suggested some success at integrating planning and environmental processes when the scope of planning was more in the facility and refinement planning realm (questions 8, 10, and 11) than in broader or the system planning realm (questions 9, 12, and 13). Questions 7 and 14 asked for “other” types of integrated planning and environmental processes. Responses included either processes to develop guidance for linking or were nonconclusive relative to what scale of planning relates to the best opportunities to link planning and environmental processes.

Questions 15–25 asked about different elements or products of integrated planning and environmental review processes with which respondents had been involved. Most, if not all, of the elements identified in questions 15–25 refer to facility planning efforts and not system planning efforts.

The majority of processes that respondents considered to be integrated involved the following elements:

- narrowing the range of alternatives
- development of a problem statement
- staff overlap between planning and environmental process for continuity
- public involvement efforts
- FHWA participation
- taking land use actions
- contribution of advisory groups
- incorporation of previous decisions by reference
- inclusion of federal and state regulatory agency representatives during planning

Two (28%) of the respondents implied that “identification of CE projects with independent utility” was an element or product of an integrated planning/review process that they had helped to develop or review.

Question 26 enquired of the respondents what aspects of planning/environmental review integration identified in questions 15–25 were most difficult to accomplish. The respondents answered the following:

- FHWA discourages the cross-use of NEPA terms in planning
- because problem statements are developed through a public process, they are difficult to develop to satisfy everyone’s concerns
- narrowing of alternatives in planning because of public ownership of different alternatives
- integrating planning and project development is difficult because of organizational differences between planning and project development at ODOT
- getting regulatory agencies to participate and review at the planning level is difficult to accomplish
- narrowing the range of alternatives during planning is difficult because it looks like ODOT is making decisions too early
- staff turnover makes integration difficult to accomplish
- integration is difficult because regulatory agencies see little reason to be involved during planning due to other demands on their time
- integrating planning and environmental documentation for ODOT projects is difficult to accomplish

Question 27 asked which components of planning projects discussed in questions 15–25 should be useable in the NEPA process. Five out of eight of the respondents to this question said that most or all of the components discussed in questions 15–25 should be useable in the NEPA process. One respondent said eliminating alternatives, public involvement, continuity, and planning problem statements and including regulatory agencies during planning. One said just a well-documented problem statement and recommended solutions would be most useful and one

focused on narrowing the range of alternatives being useable. One additional respondent replied that if a planning study was prepared looking at a wide range of alternatives, and that range of alternatives is narrowed in preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS), you should not have to repeat that process to satisfy NEPA.

Two thirds of the respondents answered “Yes” to question 28, which asked whether these components were intentionally developed, presented, and formatted so that they could be readily identified and used later in the NEPA process.

Question 29 asked what was done to make the components discussed in questions 15–25 readily identifiable and usable in a NEPA process without a difficult teasing out from the planning documents. This was the first question to ask the respondents to discuss best practices fairly directly. Respondents made the following responses:

- document headings and titles were almost directly extractible for use in the NEPA document (this ran counter to an earlier respondent’s statement that the FHWA discourages such common terminology in planning and environmental process)
- discussed a strategy for completing NEPA in the initial scoping and scheduling of the planning process
- any and all decisions made during planning that are intended to stand up under NEPA need to be pre-arranged with FHWA, the decision logic needs to be solid and defensible, and these decisions need to be specifically document in a NEPA context in the planning documents
- the process, information used, and decision milestones were documented, there was participation of environmental staff members who know NEPA documentation requirements, and they made presentations to Collaborative Environmental and Transportation Agreement for Streamlining (CETAS)
- the environmental aspects of a large project were addressed from the very beginning of project conception with focus on minimizing and expediting the NEPA process to the extent feasible

Summarizing these responses, it seems that using common language between planning and environmental process is less important than using NEPA-sufficient processes in planning that eventually will “stand up” (not need to be readdressed) during the NEPA phase.

Question 30 asked for more “best practices”, this time as they relate to useful/streamlined documentation that should be prepared when pursuing integration. Respondents offered the following responses:

- helpful to anticipate NEPA requirements upfront and have staff involved from the beginning of the planning process
- forethought must be given to the products coming from planning into NEPA, some kind of “SWAT” team may be useful in helping Regions decide what style of integration is most useful

- facility/refinement/corridor planning has the greatest opportunity to produce products that can be packaged in a manner useful to subsequent NEPA processes; documentation needs to be packaged so that overlapping elements can be readily extracted for later use
- the purpose of integration is to avoid resources in the identification and selection of alternatives so an important outcome can be either project avoidance or projects that qualify for a categorical exclusion
- if there is an expectation that planning products will lead directly into a NEPA process, we usually do a better job of packaging.

Two of the eight respondents to question 31 said that “staff continuity” yields “very high” value to planning and integration efforts, four responded that “staff continuity” yields “high” value, and two responded that “staff continuity” yielded moderate value to planning and integration efforts. Therefore, it appears that respondents placed fairly high importance on “staff continuity” to planning and integration efforts.

Question 32 asked the question about the “staff continuity” in a slightly different way. Most respondents said unequivocally that a lack of “staff continuity” negatively affected the “transition” between planning and project development. One respondent went on to say that “staff continuity” will continue to be critical until planning products can provide packaged elements that are readily extractible.

Question 33 asked how the “transition” between planning and project development proceeded. Most that responded indicated it didn’t go so well and gave examples. Only one out of seven respondents said the “transition” went well, that it was relatively seamless in two examples and that it did so because Project Development staff were included in the planning process from the beginning.

To question 34, “*In your experience(s) with integrated planning/environmental review processes, was a planner involved? Was an EPM involved? Was a Project Leader involved?*” Most of the respondents answered that all three of the disciplines were involved while two responded that if one of the three was missing it was usually the Project Leader and occasionally the EPM. One respondent stated that transition can more successful by involving a larger group earlier in the process (Planner, Project Leader, and EPM) leading to a greater level personal investment in the project success.

To question 35, “*Why did you choose to integrate planning and environmental review processes*”, responses included the following:

- it is a legal requirement
- to help make the NEPA process more efficient
- because the project required an interchange area management plan (IAMP) and it was expected that it would require NEPA documentation, it just made sense to integrate the processes

- to avoid duplicative processes but most importantly to avoid resources as much as possible when developing an integrated land use and transportation plan
- to make more sound planning decisions; and to achieve the end objective more efficiently.
- to save money and time, and to reduce duplicative processes and decisions

To question 36, *“To what degree did you have a strategic plan to link planning and environmental processes from the beginning? What did you do to ensure success”*, some responded about the degree to which a strategic plan guided their work and some responded about what they did to assure success.

- Regarding the degree to which a strategic plan guided their work, responses ranged from
 - “Little to none” and “we didn’t in the past but must in the future” to
 - “We did have a strategic plan to link planning and environmental processes”.
- Regarding what they did to ensure success, responses included
 - I provided information and guidance during the planning process.
 - We attempted to combine those steps from the earliest stages resulting in intermingled processes.
 - We established a timeline with milestones of items needed to be complete. We looked for opportunities to overlap planning, NEPA, and design”.
 - The strategy should depend on the problem at hand...a “SWAT” team would be useful to brainstorm strategies on potential planning/NEPA integration efforts in all Regions—before the planning begins.
 - Success can be ensured by assigning and budgeting for appropriate resources from all disciplines at ODOT, at the participating local, regional and State agencies, and at the consultant level.
 - The project was undertaken in a manner so that issues needed to evaluate choices could be presented and resolved. Public involvement processes were employed and meeting records kept.
 - Involvement of ODOT specialists is needed to assure that work performed by consultants is acceptable.
 - We wrote and/or managed the development of a strategic document at the inception of a project which focused on how to get the project from a concept to construction which addressed the potential key impediments to moving a difficult infrastructure project forward including political, public, environmental, cost, etc.

Five out of the nine respondents to question 37 said there were other considerations or techniques regarding best practices for integration of planning/environmental review processes that they wanted us to know about.

To question 38, when responding that there were other considerations or techniques, five responded with the following ideas:

- incorporating Systematic Development of Informed Consent (SDIC) and CETAS coordination into system plan development would pay dividends during NEPA and regulatory approvals processes
- project oversight for planning, NEPA, and design through the same consultant...keeping the prime the same throughout the planning, environmental, and design phases
- another approach that could apply would be to treat the Tier 1 NEPA document as primarily a transportation analysis of the “system” (i.e., to the extent of the holistic traffic problem), while recognizing environmental constraints...this would be most beneficial in urban areas where it is apparent that one big solution is not the answer but rather several smaller projects with independent utility
- learning each other’s language and understanding each other’s motivations is critical
- the key is to look at a project from a strategic perspective and not be afraid to admit when you have a project that “doesn’t make sense”

Responding to question 39 about whether they knew of individuals that they would recommend we talk with about best practices for integrating planning and environmental review processes, several said yes.

Those responding yes to question 39 offered the following list of names and associations for additional contact about best practices:

- Chris Woods—Oregon Federal Highway Administration
- Mark Hanson—ODOT Region 5
- Donna Kilber-Kennedy—CH2MHill
- Susan Haupt—HDR Engineering Inc.
- Scott Richman—David Evans Associates
- Sharon Kelly—URS Corporation
- Susan Vickers—ODOT Geo-Environmental
- Angela Findley—Parsons Brinckerhoff
- Jeff Heilman—Parametrix
- Norm Rauscher—Independent Consultant
- Leslie Howell—Independent Consultant
- George Fekaris—Western Federal Lands
- Michelle Eraut—Federal Highway Administration