Community Impact Assessment

A Handbook for Transportation Professionals

Central Environmental Management Office
Florida Department of Transportation

Prepared by:

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ABOUT THE HANDBOOK

Transportation projects can have major social and economic effects—both positive and negative. Analysis of community impacts provides insight into ways projects can be improved or redefined to reduce adverse impacts and increase overall project benefits. Historically, much of the attention in environmental impact assessment has been placed on the natural environment, rather than on how transportation projects affect people and communities. This handbook provides methods and indicators that practitioners can use to identify and evaluate the community impacts of transportation projects, and strategies for reducing adverse impacts. The handbook expands upon Community Impact Assessment: A Quick Reference for Transportation, which was produced by the Federal Highway Administration in 1996, and draws upon the Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment, produced by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

This handbook is intended to serve as a reference tool for the Florida Department of Transportation during planning and project development, to supplement the FDOT Project Development and Environment Manual (PD&E Manual). It is also intended as a resource guide for metropolitan planning organizations, local governments, and other agencies seeking more effective ways to integrate transportation projects into the fabric of our communities. The project was supported by a research grant from the Florida Department of Transportation, Environmental Management Office.

The handbook begins with an introduction to community impact assessment, how it relates to organizational objectives, and an overview of laws and requirements related to community impact assessment for transportation. It proceeds with a conceptual overview of the impact assessment process, and how that process relates to the various phases of transportation planning and project development. Conducting a community impact assessment requires a thorough understanding of the affected community. Part Two, Baseline Conditions, provides guidance on how to develop a community profile. Part Three sets forth techniques for assessing social and economic impacts, including community cohesion, community facilities and services, safety, mobility, economic impacts, land use, aesthetics, relocation and civil rights. Part Four includes Appendices that provide tools and information for various assessment activities.
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CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS COMMUNITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT?

Community impact assessment (CIA) is “a process to evaluate the effects of a transportation action on a community and its quality of life.”¹ It is a way to incorporate community considerations into the planning and development of major transportation projects. From a policy perspective, it is a process for assessing the social and economic impacts of transportation projects as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The assessment may address a variety of important community issues such as land development, aesthetics, mobility, neighborhood cohesion, safety, relocation, and economic impacts.

WHY IS COMMUNITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT NEEDED?

Transportation projects can affect communities in a variety of ways – both positive and negative. On the negative side, transportation projects may be developed without attention to the surrounding area, thereby disrupting or dividing stable and cohesive neighborhoods, damaging community character, promoting urban sprawl, or impeding pedestrian mobility. On the positive side, transportation projects can be shaped to help revitalize business districts, stimulate economic development, improve access to jobs, reinforce growth management goals, and enhance community character.

Despite their importance, community issues have often not received the same priority in transportation project development as other environmental issues, such as recreational areas, historic structures, air quality, wetlands, or endangered species that are subject to special regulation or agency oversight. The community impact assessment program at the Florida Department of Transportation was developed to assure that transportation projects are developed with full consideration of their impact on people and communities. In particular, CIA advances the following goals:

**Quality of Life:** Helps to promote livable, sustainable communities by placing priority on preserving or enhancing community character, neighborhood cohesion, social interaction, safety, economic prosperity, and general quality of life.

Responsiveness: Promotes responsive, community-sensitive decision-making in planning and developing transportation projects that embraces community concerns, seeks to minimize conflict, and works to help solve community problems.

Coordination: Improves coordination among the agencies and jurisdictions involved in transportation, land use, environmental preservation, resource management, and economic development.

Nondiscrimination: Ensures that environmental justice is achieved by alerting decision makers to impacts on all segments of society and avoiding disproportionate adverse impacts on specific populations.

HOW DOES COMMUNITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT RELATE TO PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT?

Public involvement is an essential tool for community impact assessment. Public involvement activities help to identify groups affected by a transportation project and any impacts those groups perceive as significant. Involved parties can then provide insight into workable alternatives and mitigation options. Alternatively, community impact assessment helps assure that public involvement programs are meaningful. It provides a process for evaluating issues and concerns raised in the public forum and the potential impacts of various alternatives. It also helps to assure that community objectives are integrated into project decisions where possible.

General process for incorporating community values into transportation projects:

1. Define the problem to be solved.
2. Identify community and agency issues and objectives for consideration.
3. Develop possible alternative solutions to the problem.
4. Translate community and agency issues and objectives into evaluation criteria.
5. Evaluate and compare alternative solutions.
6. Select an alternative.

Source: Adapted from Route 101/Mabury Road Area Freeway Access Study Newsletter, San Jose, California, March 1993.

Community impact assessment also supplements public involvement by helping to identify the broader range of social and economic impacts of a project, and identifying effects on minorities, low-income groups, the disabled, and others historically underrepresented in the public involvement process. A thorough, objective assessment of likely impacts—both positive and negative—promotes informed public dialogue. Ultimately, this improves the quality and equity of public decision-making.

**ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES & OBJECTIVES**

Community impact assessment requires certain changes in the way transportation projects are planned and developed. *First*, transportation planners and project managers will need to be responsive to community issues and more proactive in identifying and addressing potential adverse community impacts. The process for identifying community impacts must begin early enough to address such issues without incurring substantial production delays. This suggests the need to initiate community impact assessment in the planning phase, although the most in-depth assessment of community impacts will still occur during project development.

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**Qualities of Effective Projects**

1. The project is a safe facility for the user and the community.
2. The project satisfies the purpose and needs established by all of the parties involved. This agreement, on purpose and need, should be established at the earliest phase of a project and modified as warranted.
3. The project is in harmony with the community and preserves environmental, scenic, aesthetic, historic and natural resources of the area. Remember, not every roadway needs to be an interstate design.
4. The project exceeds the expectations of both the designers and our customers and achieves a level of excellence in the public’s mind.
5. The project is designed and built with minimal disruption to the community.
6. The project is seen as having added lasting value to the community.

*Comments of Rick Chesser, District Four Secretary, Florida Department of Transportation, at the 1998 FDOT Environmental Management Office Conference.*
Second, the process must have continuity – that is, it should carry the identified issues and resulting commitments from planning through to construction. Third, the process must be comprehensive and identify, as well as involve, other agencies that have a role in addressing community impacts. Overall, this represents a shift toward a more responsive and community sensitive decision-making process.

COORDINATION

Coordination With Other Agencies

The Florida Department of Transportation and Florida’s twenty-five metropolitan planning organizations plan and develop major transportation facilities. Local governments prepare comprehensive plans and land development regulations. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection oversees compliance with state and federal environmental laws. The Florida Department of Community Affairs oversees local planning and compliance with state growth management laws. Economic development groups, like Enterprise Florida or local community redevelopment agencies, develop plans and strategies to strengthen the economy. Each of these planning activities is closely related and dependent upon the outcomes of the other. Yet, agencies often operate independently, reducing their individual effectiveness.

By addressing a broader range of community issues, the assessment process helps to improve coordination between the agencies involved in transportation, land use, and economic development. The project can be shaped to help communities advance growth management policies, local comprehensive plans, land development regulations, economic development objectives and environmental laws. In addition, the assessment process helps to clarify for the public which agency has jurisdiction over problems or issues that are uncovered, and the role of each agency in resolving those issues. The result is a much higher potential for collaboration and effective solutions to state and local problems.

Internal Coordination and Continuity

Developing a transportation project can take five to ten years and sometimes longer. This time frame makes it difficult to maintain a “project memory” of issues or commitments, both within the agency and among the affected stakeholders. Yet, internal coordination and continuity in addressing community issues is critical to effective project development. Issues may arise in planning or project development that need to be communicated to designers or addressed during construction. Agency credibility can be damaged when commitments are made in project development and overlooked in design and construction, or when changes are made to a project in later phases without appropriate public involvement and consideration of potential impacts.
The Florida Department of Transportation has an initiative underway, called PLEMO, aimed at improving internal coordination and continuity in transportation decision-making. PLEMO is designed to integrate planning and environmental management and incorporate NEPA considerations earlier in the planning process. It also sets forth a team approach to evaluating conceptual alternatives in order to maintain internal and interagency coordination as well as continuity of project decisions.

Documenting community impacts helps FDOT maintain continuity in decision-making and enforce “commitment compliance.” As projects proceed from planning through construction, it is imperative that each office responsible for a particular phase of work provides the next office with documentation of impacts that need to be considered in that phase and any commitments made to the public in previous phases. NEPA requires reevaluation of the project in the separate phases of project development to ensure compliance with state and federal laws before advancing to the next production phase. The community impact assessment process provides a method of documenting information on community conditions, project impacts, and proposed solutions that will be received at each reevaluation phase.

**PLEMO: Planning & Environmental Management**

PLEMO is a program of the Florida Department of Transportation that is aimed at improving internal and interagency coordination in transportation planning and project development. Highlights include:

- Rough feasibility analysis in long range planning to eliminate infeasible projects earlier in the planning process.
- Evaluation of conceptual alternatives using a project management team comprised of both planning and environmental management staff.
- Cross-functional project advisory teams for evaluating alternatives, including members from planning, environmental management, design, traffic operations, Metropolitan Planning Organization, local governments, and transit operators.
- Corridor level analysis during evaluation of conceptual alternatives to establish a project need statement that meets requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act and to further identify social, economic and environmental issues prior to project development.

**LEGAL REQUIREMENTS AND POLICY DIRECTIONS**

Community impact assessment is legally required and supported by a host of Federal regulations, statutes, policies, technical advisories and Executive Orders dating back to the 1960s. The pivotal legislation requiring attention to community impacts is the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 or NEPA. NEPA was enacted due to growing concern over the
environmental impacts of major federal actions and legislation, as well as increasing citizen activism on these issues.

The purpose of the NEPA process is to identify impacts on the quality of the environment. The Act called for a systematic and interdisciplinary approach to evaluating the environmental effects of transportation projects and identifying reasonable alternatives that will avoid or reduce harmful impacts. Toward that end, NEPA required the preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) for federally funded actions that significantly affect the natural or human environment. Subsequent procedures established that proposed project decisions be in the overall public interest for safe and efficient transportation, and consider potential social, economic and environmental impacts and environmental protection goals. NEPA and supporting policies and regulations emphasized the importance of public involvement in these issues.

The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1970 listed the social and economic impacts that must be considered for highway projects (Section 23 USC 109 (h)). These impacts are:

1. Air, noise and water pollution.
2. Destruction or disruption of man-made resources, aesthetic values, community cohesion, and availability of public facilities and services.
3. Adverse employment effects, and tax and property value losses.
4. Injurious displacement of people, businesses and farms.
5. Disruption of desirable community and regional growth.

Section 23 USC 128 (“Highways”) established a minimum requirement for investigating social, economic, and environmental effects of highway projects, and the consistency of highway plans with local comprehensive planning. The section required each state Department of Transportation to certify that it has held or provided the opportunity for public hearings on all Federal-aid highway projects that bypass or go through a community.

“When developing transportation projects that have received federal funds, agencies must consider the economic and social effects of the project location, its impact on the environment, and consistency of the project with the goals and objectives of local comprehensive plans.”

— Section 23 USC 128

In 1994, the Federal Highway Administration elevated its commitment to environmental management and public involvement by adopting a policy to seek new partnerships with tribal governments, businesses, interest groups, resource and regulatory agencies, affected neighborhoods, and the public. The 1994 FHWA Environmental Policy Statement emphasizes the importance of ensuring adequate outreach to minority and low-income populations and calls for: “actively involving our partners and all affected parties in an open, cooperative, and collaborative process, beginning at the earliest planning stages and continuing through project development, construction, and operation.”
This policy was supplemented by Executive Order 12898 on Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, and a corresponding U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) order on environmental justice, issued in 1997. The intent of these actions was to reinforce existing environmental and civil rights legislation and further ensure that minority and low-income populations “…are not subject to disproportionately high and adverse environmental effects of transportation policies, programs and projects.”

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), Standing Committee on the Environment, also became actively involved in community impact issues in the mid-1990s. AASHTO raised the need to better direct states on how to address community and social issues during planning and the NEPA process.

Two important guides related to community impacts grew out of this movement. One was an FHWA primer entitled “Community Impact Assessment: A Quick Reference for Transportation.” The other was an FHWA guide entitled “Flexibility in Highway Design” that clarified the flexibility available to roadway designers when applying design criteria of the AASHTO “Green Book” (A Policy on the Geometric Design of Highways and Streets). The Flexibility in Highway Design guide emphasized the importance of “context sensitive design” of major roadways and the need to consider community values, the character of an area, and the needs of highway users, among other issues.

The growing policy support for community impact assessment on the national level parallels the movement to streamline the environmental process. These policy initiatives are an effort to overcome what has historically been a disjointed, cumbersome, and often bureaucratic process that has fallen short of the policy intent of NEPA. This handbook furthers state and national environmental policy by providing practical, effective ways for identifying and reducing the community impacts of transportation projects.

“…the standard or conservative use of the Green Book criteria and related State standards, along with a lack of full consideration of community values, can cause a road to be out of context with its surroundings. It may also preclude designers from avoiding impacts on important natural and human resources.”

—Flexibility in Highway Design