CHAPTER 5 : SOCIAL IMPACTS

Social impacts of a transportation project are impacts that disrupt the normal daily functions of a community or neighborhood. Typically, it is the broader region or jurisdiction that enjoys the social benefits of a transportation project while the social impacts are borne by the local community—particularly the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the transportation project. Therefore, social impact assessment is often conducted at the neighborhood level.

But what is a “community” or “neighborhood?” Social scientists have defined these terms in a variety of ways. Some defining characteristics of a “community” include: geographic proximity and boundaries, a shared sense of identity, shared ethnicity or demographic characteristics, religious affiliation, common membership in a group or organization, psychological unity among the residents, social stability, or the common use of facilities or services in an area. A “neighborhood” is a small social unit based on face-to-face contacts and a sub-unit of the geographic community. A neighborhood can also be thought of as a local area with an identity that can be distinguished from the larger jurisdiction and where the daily life of residents involves contact with or dependence on other neighborhood residents, businesses and facilities.

Social impacts have historically been given little consideration during the development of transportation projects. The evidence lies in the many communities that have been adversely affected by transportation projects. In some cases, the social impacts were so severe that affected neighborhoods were unable to recover. Because of these situations, state and federal transportation and environmental laws now require that potential social impacts of transportation projects be identified and addressed. Chapter 9 of the Project Development and Environment (PD&E) Manual requires that all potential social impacts from a transportation project be addressed during the preparation of an environmental document. This chapter provides methods to achieve those objectives.

UNDERSTANDING POTENTIAL IMPACTS

Social impacts can be generally categorized under the following headings:

- Community Cohesion;
- Community Facilities and Services;
- Mobility; and
- Safety.
These impacts are not mutually exclusive; nor can they be measured independently. They are interrelated and are best understood when considered together. For example, a road-widening project may increase vehicle speeds and reduce pedestrian crossing opportunities, making it more difficult for residents to move freely about the neighborhood (a mobility impact). The same project may impair access to the neighborhood corner grocery store (a community facility impact), and make it less safe for disabled, school-aged, or elderly residents who regularly cross the road (a safety impact). Therefore, any analysis of social impacts must be considered holistically.

**What is Community Cohesion?**

Community cohesion is the degree to which residents have a sense of belonging to their neighborhood or community, including commitment to the community or a strong attachment to neighbors, institutions in the community, or particular groups. The level of community cohesion is often evidenced by the degree of interaction among individuals, groups, and institutions within a community.

A sense of community is generally expressed through frequent social interaction, use of community facilities and services, local participation and involvement in social activities, and an undefined sense of solidarity. Members of a “cohesive community” often have a collective outward identity. Other indicators include the presence of recognized community leaders, residential stability, a family orientation, active elderly populations, defined community or neighborhood organizations, and area name identification.

![Figure 5-1: Traditional neighborhoods often exhibit a high level of cohesion.](image)
The assessment of social impacts should answer two questions relative to community cohesion. First, is there evidence that community cohesion exists in the neighborhoods adjacent to the project alternatives? Second, if there is evidence of cohesion, will the project alternatives damage that cohesiveness and, if so, to what extent? Transportation projects can adversely affect community cohesion through relocation or barrier effects. For example, the large scale relocation of residents or removal of popular meeting places or community facilities can unravel the delicate balance of social interaction in a neighborhood.

Transportation projects can also create a physical or perceived barrier within the neighborhood, discouraging neighborhood interaction across the facility. The barrier effect is especially damaging to cohesiveness if it involves physically isolating one section of a neighborhood from the rest. For example, the extension of a grade-separated expressway may physically separate and isolate a few blocks of a neighborhood, diminishing the cohesiveness of the neighborhood as a whole. Isolation of the area could lead to a variety of unwelcome circumstances, such as increased residential turnover, social isolation for the elderly or disabled, and increased crime.

Conversely, transportation projects can improve community cohesion. For example, a transportation improvement project may remove cut-through traffic from nearby residential streets and provide additional pedestrian crossings, making it easier for neighborhood children to cross streets and generally increasing opportunities for neighborly interaction.

What are Community Facilities and Services?

In general, a community facility or service is any public or private organization that a local population relies upon for goods or services. Community facilities and services include, but are not limited to:

- Schools;
- Religious institutions;
- Parks, recreation centers and playgrounds;
- Social service agencies;
- Housing for the elderly, retirement centers, or other special needs residential facilities;
- Hospitals and other medical facilities;
- Community centers;
- Senior centers;
- Libraries;
- Retail and other commercial establishments;
- Day care centers; and
- Emergency services, such as fire and police stations.
Not only do these facilities provide essential services, they also contribute to higher levels of community cohesion. The availability and use of community facilities and services, both public and private, plays an important role in determining the degree of cohesion, social interaction, and overall quality of life in a community.

The question that the social impact assessment attempts to answer is, will the project impede or enhance the ability of residents to make full use of community facilities and services? A transportation project can adversely impact a neighborhood by removing or relocating community facilities and services or otherwise impairing access to those facilities. Conversely, the impact could be positive if a community facility is relocated to an area that is actually more accessible to neighborhood residents.

**A Note on the Needs of Special Groups**

Some groups may have greater difficulty negotiating adverse project impacts, such as seniors, children, persons with disabilities, low-income persons, and racial or ethnic minorities. For example, transportation projects requiring displacement may intensify existing problems of segregation or discrimination for minorities. In addition, low-income individuals, seniors, persons with disabilities, and minorities tend to rely on internal community social networks more than other groups and often have greater difficulty adjusting to changes in these networks. Seniors, children and persons with disabilities may require special design features, such as pedestrian facilities, to facilitate mobility during and after project construction.

**What is Mobility?**

Mobility has several definitions depending upon the subject of analysis. For the purpose of social impact assessment, mobility is simply the ability of local residents to move freely about their community. This definition incorporates all modes of transportation and places special emphasis on the ability of non-driving populations (disabled, low-income, elderly and children) to move freely about the neighborhood and carry out normal daily activities. It is determined by the degree of accessibility of various areas and land uses within a neighborhood.
The question that the social impact assessment attempts to answer regarding mobility is, will project alternatives enhance or impede the ability of residents to move freely about the neighborhood? A transportation project can affect mobility by creating physical and psychological barriers within the neighborhood. A widened road may attract more vehicles, potentially making it more difficult for pedestrians to cross. For an elderly or disabled person, the sheer length of the journey may create a barrier. Both of these scenarios can be addressed through pedestrian-friendly features in the roadway design. However, not addressing neighborhood mobility issues in the project development process could have a significant adverse effect on the quality of life in the neighborhood.

Transportation projects or programs can also positively affect neighborhood mobility. A transportation improvement project could improve traffic flow on a major thoroughfare, thereby reducing cut through traffic on neighborhood streets and improving conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists. Including a new bus stop location or a bike path in the project design could also increase neighborhood mobility. An access management policy aimed at increasing vehicular and pedestrian connections between businesses helps to improve the overall accessibility of those areas.

**What is Safety?**

For most transportation projects, safety is typically assessed in terms of vehicular safety using crash data as the measure. Community impact assessment requires a broader definition that includes the effects of the transportation project on neighborhood safety. In this context, the assessment of safety impacts also considers whether or not residents feel safe in their neighborhood and includes issues such as crime, emergency services and bicycle/pedestrian safety. The question to answer when assessing potential safety impacts is, will project alternatives negatively or positively affect non-motorist (pedestrian and bicycle) safety conditions, crime in the neighborhood, and emergency (police, medical, and fire) response times?

For example, a transportation project may result in increased vehicular traffic, wider rights-of-way, and higher travel speeds that adversely affect pedestrian safety. Such impacts could be more severe for elderly persons and persons with disabilities, who may find it more difficult to cross the road safely. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the significance of these impacts must also be considered in context. For example, if the study area has relatively low levels of pedestrian activity and the project would resolve a traffic hazard, then pedestrian impacts are probably not as significant.

Barrier effects caused by transportation projects can also impede or enhance the delivery of emergency services in a neighborhood. Increased congestion, or local street closures caused by an above grade expressway, can delay emergency response times. Conversely, decreased congestion or improved
neighborhood access attributable to project alternatives can improve emergency response times.

Transportation projects can also contribute or be perceived as contributing to increased neighborhood susceptibility to crime and reduced “community policing.” For example, if a roadway extension physically separates a park from the rest of the neighborhood, the physical separation can have the effect of reducing the real or perceived safety of the park. Safety impacts such as these can be addressed through attention to design features such as visibility of various areas from the roadway, roadway width, lighting, and landscaping or even through partnering strategies, such as involving a municipality in developing a crime prevention program for the area.

**DATA SOURCES**

Most of the data required to assess social impacts should have been collected and mapped during development of the community profile, as described in Chapter 4. This includes all relevant demographic, economic, and housing data, an inventory and map of community facilities and services and transportation characteristics, and a summary of community issues and attitudes. Additional suggestions for identifying existing conditions are provided below by topic area.

Other relevant information would have been collected for the purpose of describing the project and study area, as described in Chapter 2. This includes the statement of purpose and need for the project, which should be available from the Long Range Transportation Plan developed by the Metropolitan Planning Organization, and local comprehensive plans. The FDOT planning office may also maintain relevant background material on project planning issues.

Fieldwork is particularly important for understanding social characteristics of neighborhoods in the study area. Time should be spent observing and recording neighborhood activities in relation to the social issues that have been identified. Things to look for include general levels of pedestrian activity and whether residents walk to neighborhood facilities such as parks, schools, community centers, and businesses. Also, do residents interact with each other? Do neighbors stop and talk to each other on the street? Do neighborhood kids play together at the playground or at each other’s houses? Do seniors congregate at a particular location in the neighborhood?

Where social impacts are a potentially significant issue, additional information may be needed for an accurate impact assessment. Supplemental data collection activities would be aimed at expanding upon the community profile and obtaining information specific to a neighborhood. This information can be collected through interviews, surveys, and observation.\(^1\) *A sample questionnaire and survey instrument for social impact assessment is provided in Appendix A.* The questionnaire can be used either to supplement or develop the community profile. The sample survey instrument can be used and modified to collect more

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\(^1\) For basic information on how to conduct statistically significant surveys, see Chapters 4-6 of the *1999 Commuter Assistance Program Evaluation Manual* (Center for Urban Transportation Research, University of South Florida, Tampa).
detailed information, particularly for community cohesion. Be sure to include a description of the proposed project and a diagram of project alternatives with the survey.

**ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES**

The assessment of social impacts is aimed at determining whether a project could affect study area neighborhoods, positively or negatively, in terms of community cohesion, community facilities and services, mobility, and safety. Bear in mind that these social impacts are often interrelated. In addition, the assessment should be:

- Sensitive to neighborhood conditions and characteristics;
- Easy to understand; and
- Readily available to stakeholders.

The technique described in this chapter emphasizes simplicity and community involvement. Although simple, this assessment technique provides a reasonable basis for determining social impacts of a transportation project. Assessment techniques that are simply performed, easily understood and incorporate the sentiments of community stakeholders will be the most effective and valuable to the project development process.

In general, any assessment of social impacts should involve:

- Identifying existing conditions relative to community cohesion, community facilities and services, mobility and safety in each neighborhood adjacent to project alternatives; and
- Determining the potential social impacts to those neighborhoods, both beneficial and adverse, attributable to proposed project alternatives.

When potential impacts of project alternatives are determined, the results should be shared with stakeholders and community leaders for their review and input. This will provide local verification that the assessment accurately portrays existing neighborhood conditions and will serve to notify the neighborhood of potential impacts of the project. Keeping leaders and stakeholders informed will also reduce local anxiety over the agency’s intentions and serve to build trust between the agency and the neighborhood. The information obtained through this process can then be used in the project development process so that the final project alternative is developed with sensitivity toward potential social impacts.

**What Level of Assessment is Appropriate?**

The effort expended in determining social impacts should be directly related to the nature of the proposed transportation project, the perceived potential social impacts of the project, and the importance placed on those impacts by the community. If it is determined that potential social impacts will cause strong public opposition to the transportation project or that significant social impacts are likely to result from the project, a more extensive social impact assessment is warranted. Typically, the assessment of social impacts can be accomplished through the techniques provided in this handbook. Under unique
circumstances, it may be necessary to enlist the services of a social impact assessment specialist to serve as a supplemental project resource, particularly in situations where the relationship between the Department and the affected community is strained.

**Identifying Existing Conditions**

Begin the assessment by determining the general baseline conditions for each social issue area – community cohesion, community facilities and services, safety, and mobility. Chapter 4 describes how to establish baseline conditions through a community profile. Determining social baseline conditions in study area neighborhoods is best accomplished by reviewing the socio-economic inventory map, notes from field visits and the summary of pertinent community issues and attitudes.

**Community Cohesion**

For community cohesion, relevant information includes the location of special populations, the location of community facilities and services, housing data and information conveying resident attitudes about their neighborhood, and general observation of community life. Consider how the manner in which they interact with their neighbors and community facilities. Neighborhood activity information can only be collected through leader interviews, neighborhood observation and resident surveys.

Compare this information to the indicators of community cohesion listed below and, using professional judgment, determine the existing cohesiveness of study area neighborhoods. Determining cohesion is a subjective task and can be estimated based on the number of indicators that apply to a neighborhood. In general, the more indicators that apply to a neighborhood, the more cohesive that neighborhood is. For example, a neighborhood in which neighbors interact frequently, rely on community facilities, have long-serving local leadership, are satisfied with the quality of life in the neighborhood, desire to stay in the neighborhood, and identify with the neighborhood would, in general, be considered cohesive. Summarize in detail the findings of this exercise.

**Indicators of Community Cohesion**

- **Interaction among neighbors:** Frequent and intense interaction between community members indicates higher levels of community cohesion. Generally, neighbors within a cohesive community interact more frequently and build strong, social relationships beyond an occasional greeting.

- **Use of community facilities:** Use of and reliance on local services and facilities indicates community cohesiveness. Local facilities include, but are not limited to, shopping areas, churches, businesses, medical facilities, and social services.

- **Long-serving community leadership:** The presence of long-serving, active community leadership indicates community cohesion. This indicator can be applied to local political leadership, civic leadership, business leadership and religious leadership.

- **Participation in local organizations:** Active participation in local organizations indicates community cohesion.
• Identification with the community: Members of cohesive communities typically “identify” with the neighborhood. Indicators include the existence of an established neighborhood name and an identifiable boundary.

• Desire to stay in the community: Members of cohesive communities usually have a strong desire to remain in the neighborhood and are typically resistant to the idea of change that may lead to the disruption of the neighborhood social fabric.

• Satisfaction with the community: Members of cohesive communities usually express great satisfaction with life in the neighborhood. Residents may express a desire for specific refinements or improvements, but in general are highly satisfied with the quality of life within the neighborhood.

• Homogeneity (income, ethnicity, age, etc.): In general, homogeneity of population contributes to higher levels of community cohesion. Homogeneity in terms of income and ethnicity appear to be important indicators of community cohesion.

• Family-oriented versus singles-oriented communities: In general, family neighborhoods are more cohesive than neighborhoods comprised of largely single people. This appears to be because children tend to establish friendships with other children in their community. The social networks of children often lead to the establishment of friendships and affiliations among parents in the community.

• Length of residency compared with other variables (e.g., satisfaction with community): Long-term, voluntary residence in a neighborhood often signals cohesion because residents have time to establish social networks and develop an identity with the neighborhood. Length of residency should be compared to other measures of community cohesion, such as stated satisfaction with the community and participation in local organizations. This will determine if residents are remaining in the community because they want to be there or because they are unable to leave due to economic hardship or other factors. Vacancy rates within the neighborhood can also be used to determine if more people are moving in than leaving the neighborhood.

**Community Facilities and Services**

Information required to assess social impacts to community facilities and services includes the exact location of all community facilities and services such as schools, recreation centers, parks, businesses, religious institutions and the manner in which neighborhood residents relate to the community facilities and services (use, access and neighborhood activities). The latter information can be collected using a combination of neighborhood observation, stakeholder interviews or through a survey of neighborhood residents.

Using the socio-economic inventory map prepared in the community profile, identify and highlight the community facilities and services used frequently in study area neighborhoods and those that serve special populations in the neighborhood (senior centers, day care centers, ethnic businesses in ethnic neighborhoods, etc.). Also, using information gained from social service providers and/or origin destination surveys (see Mobility below) determine the general location of the primary users of each community facility and service and
identify the most common routes used to gain access to these locations. Note the preferred mode of travel used to access each facility and service.

**Mobility**

Most data required to assess mobility within study area neighborhoods should be available from the community profile, neighborhood observation and survey results. Useful information includes data showing the general layout of the neighborhood, the location of special populations, concentrations of pedestrian and bicycle activity (based on neighborhood observation) and neighborhood travel behavior (based on responses to neighborhood surveys). Both existing and future traffic data should be available from the transportation needs analysis carried out as part of the overall PD&E effort.

If mobility is raised as a community concern or special populations could be adversely impacted, additional mobility data may be needed. Additional baseline data can be collected by conducting a limited origin-destination survey at key points in the community. The survey is a simple interviewing exercise whereby pedestrians and bicyclists are asked to define their travel patterns. Collect the data at neighborhood locations with a high level of bicycle and pedestrian activity or at key community facilities. Neighborhood leaders can help identify good locations to collect this type of information.

Sample questions for a limited origin-destination assessment include:

- Where are you going?
- Where are you coming from?
- Do you typically walk/bike to reach this destination?
- How often do you make this trip?
- At what time do you typically make this trip?
- Where else do you typically walk/bike in the neighborhood?
- At what time of day do you typically make the trips?
- Do you find this neighborhood convenient to walk/bike in?
- Do you generally feel safe walking/biking in this neighborhood?
- What locations within the community do you feel less safe in while walking/biking?

After the relevant information has been collected, map the existing mobility conditions in study area neighborhoods. Identify, at a minimum, vehicular and non-motorized traffic patterns, areas where travel modes interface (transit stops, pedestrian crossings, etc.), general travel behavior in the study area, and any mobility issues unique to the area (e.g. special event locations, pedestrian crossings serving persons with disabilities, etc.).

**Safety**

Most data required to assess safety should already be available from the community profile. Particular attention should be paid to those community facilities and services that are sensitive from a safety standpoint such as schools, religious institutions, hospitals, other medical facilities, senior centers, etc. Also, additional information on community safety (resident opinion on
neighborhood safety issues) should be provided through survey results. Supplemental information regarding emergency services should be gathered by meeting with emergency service providers in the study area. Ask those providers to identify emergency route information and any neighborhood facilities and areas that are sensitive to changes in the provision of emergency services.

Identify and map existing study area safety conditions, including:

- Areas where safety is an identified concern;
- Emergency routing information; and
- Neighborhood structures and areas sensitive to changes in the provision of emergency services.

**Summarize Existing Conditions**

The final product of these efforts should be a map identifying all existing neighborhood conditions related to social impact assessment and a summary of key issues. This map would be based upon the socio-economic inventory conducted in the community profile and any additional information obtained that is specific to the various social impact areas. There should also be an estimate of community cohesion for study area neighborhoods.

**Determining Potential Impacts**

Using the summary of existing conditions, now evaluate potential social impacts associated with project alternatives. The assessment can be accomplished as follows:

1. **Overlay a map showing the alignment of each project alternative onto the socio-economic inventory map.** Compare the maps as follows:
   - Using the map overlay and the information on community cohesion from the baseline assessment, complete the social impact assessment checklist provided below. Document all relevant information resulting in a ‘yes” answer to a checklist question. (Note: The checklist is provided as a general guide and should be modified to meet specific project needs.)
Checklist for Assessing Social Impacts

1. Will the project create a barrier that divides the neighborhood or limits access to all or part of the neighborhood?  
   Yes □ No □

2. Will the project impact any special groups (such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, racial/ethnic/religious groups) within the neighborhood?  
   Yes □ No □

3. Will the project reduce the amount of social interaction that occurs within the neighborhood?  
   Yes □ No □

4. Will the displacement of residents resulting from the proposed project negatively affect the perceived quality of life in the neighborhood?  
   Yes □ No □

5. Will the project affect access to, or result in the removal of, neighborhood facilities or services that are needed and valued by neighborhood residents?  
   Yes □ No □

6. Will the facilities and services subject to removal or relocation be able to remain in or within proximity of the neighborhood?  
   Yes □ No □

7. Will the project result in an increase in noise, vibration, odor or pollution that reduces social interaction in the neighborhood?  
   Yes □ No □

8. Will communal areas (e.g., parks and playgrounds) used by residents be negatively affected by construction of the project?  
   Yes □ No □

9. Will the availability and convenience of transit services be reduced as a result of the project?  
   Yes □ No □

10. Will the project negatively affect pedestrian and non-motorized mobility within the neighborhood?  
    Yes □ No □

11. Will vehicular mobility within the neighborhood be negatively affected by this project?  
    Yes □ No □

12. Will vehicular traffic increase as a result of the project?  
    Yes □ No □

13. If vehicular traffic increases, will this create unsafe conditions for non-motorized transportation within the neighborhood?  
    Yes □ No □

14. Will “blind or isolated” areas be created that are difficult to monitor for criminal activity as a result of the project?  
    Yes □ No □

15. Will emergency response routes be negatively impacted as a result of the project?  
    Yes □ No □
2. **For each “yes” answer, note whether the impact will be permanent or temporary.** For example, access to community facilities and services may be impeded during construction, but not following construction (a temporary social impact). The most important outcome of this exercise is to look critically and objectively at the project alternatives and consider all potential impacts to study area neighborhoods from the perspective of all parties potentially impacted. Use the screening criteria provided in Table 2-2 to consider the relative significance of each impact identified on the checklist. Weigh each impact in relation to study area characteristics and relevant project benefits. Summarize the results of this analysis.

3. **When the checklist is complete, prepare a written summary of potential social impacts of each project alternative on study area neighborhoods.** Document all relevant supporting information, particularly information leading to a “yes” answer. There is no quantitative scoring or evaluation mechanism associated with the social impact assessment checklist. In general, the more “yes” answers, the more potential that social impacts will result from project alternatives.

4. **Present the results of the assessment and the method used to reach those results to study area stakeholders for their input.** They may recognize a potential impact that the analyst using the checklist may overlook. Ask them if there are any additional impacts that may have been overlooked.

5. **Identify strategies for addressing each impact.** A “yes” answer to any of the checklist questions indicates the need to explore the potential for revising alternatives or otherwise addressing the impacts. Some impacts may be unavoidable and may require mitigation. The solution may be more or less extensive, depending upon the significance of the particular impact and its relationship to project benefits. Sample mitigation and problem solving ideas are provided below.

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<th>Assessing Potential Social Impacts</th>
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<td><strong>Step 1:</strong> Create a map overlay of existing neighborhood conditions and proposed project alternatives.</td>
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MITIGATION AND PROBLEM SOLVING

A broad range of strategies for addressing adverse community impacts are presented throughout this handbook. Below is an overview of some additional sample strategies for addressing social impacts.

1. **Avoid** – Alter the project to avoid a potential impact. Examples include:
   - Shifting a project to avoid displacing a church that serves as the focal point of neighborhood activities;
   - Shifting a project to avoid creating a barrier through a cohesive neighborhood; or
   - Shifting a project to avoid separating a vital community facility like a park or a senior center from a cohesive neighborhood.

2. **Minimize** – Modify the project to reduce the severity of an impact. Examples include:
   - Reducing the project design speed in order to accommodate narrower lanes; or
   - Locating a transit facility such that vacant land is utilized instead of taking a valued neighborhood business.

3. **Mitigate** – Undertake an action to alleviate or offset an impact or to replace an appropriated resource. Examples include:
   - Relocating an impacted community facility in a new, easily accessible location within the neighborhood; or
   - Improving crosswalks, adding traffic calming devices and increasing pedestrian crossing times in areas with high levels of pedestrian traffic.

4. **Enhance** – Add a desirable or attractive feature to the project to make it fit more harmoniously into the community. Examples include:
   - Incorporating landscaping and street furniture into a project design;
   - Providing a small park or recreational use (i.e., fishing pier) along a causeway or under a bridge.

CONCLUSION

The results of the social impact assessment can be used to guide the project development process. Upon completing the assessment of social impacts, do the following:

- Incorporate all relevant actions taken, findings reached, and commitments made as part of the assessment of social impacts into the CIA report (see outline on page 4-14);
- File all relevant documentation in the official project file;
- Incorporate the relevant findings of this assessment into the project development process to minimize the social impacts of the final project on study area neighborhoods; and
- Incorporate the documentation from the assessment into the relevant section of the environmental document for this project per the Engineering Reports Chapter in Part 1 of the PD&E Manual.