

Successes **in** Stewardship

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TDOT's Environmental Procedures Manual: A First-Line Resource for Environmental Reviews

Two of the numerous priorities that State Departments of Transportation must address are the need to perform in-depth environmental reviews and the need to prepare high-quality environmental documents through a streamlined project development process. The Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) is making great strides in achieving both of these goals through the recently published Tennessee Environmental Procedures Manual (TEPM).

TEPM presents an approach that combines streamlining, interagency coordination, context-sensitive solutions, and public involvement with updated information on environmental review processes under the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). TEPM is also an excellent reference for a variety of topics related to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, and it provides helpful links to additional resources.

Renewing the Commitment to Public Involvement and Environmental Stewardship

Within the last few years, TDOT has undergone significant change. In 2003, when State Transportation Commissioner Gerald Nicely took office, TDOT renewed its commitment to public involvement and environmental stewardship. In 2005, as part of an effort to establish a transportation vision for the state, the agency completed a new statewide long-range multimodal plan. Following the recent completion of a Statewide Storm Water Management Plan, TDOT's Environmental Division is currently implementing interagency streamlining agreements and developing a statewide environmental management system.

The development of TEPM began modestly in 2003 but soon grew into a major undertaking. After completing a comprehensive assessment of the agency's environmental review process in 2003, TDOT began assembling environmental review guidelines for state-funded transportation projects. This evolved into a combined effort to overhaul a 20-year-old NEPA manual and to create new state project guidelines. After SAFETEA-LU was enacted in August 2005, the new legislation's environmental review provisions were also incorporated into the draft TEPM.

After four years of interparty collaboration, TDOT completed the TEPM manual. An independent consultant performed most of the research and writing, with extensive input from TDOT environmental staff. The TDOT Environmental Advisory Council, a representative organization of environmental leaders in Tennessee (see sidebar), provided valuable feedback, as did FHWA's Tennessee Division Office, which reviewed a refined draft of the manual.

Taking a Step-by-Step Approach to Environmental Reviews

TDOT looked to other states for guidance in developing an outline for TEPM. The end result was a first-line resource for state transportation professionals in updating individual NEPA guidance materials.



The Tennessee Environmental Procedures Manual (TEPM) provides useful start-to-finish information on the environmental review process for transportation projects. The Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge set a state precedent for context-sensitive solutions with its award-winning design. (Photo courtesy of FHWA)

TDOT's Environmental Advisory Council

TDOT received expert advice from the Environmental Advisory Council in preparing its Environmental Procedures Manual. The Council is made up of some of the state's most experienced environmental leaders, nominated by environmental groups. Formed in 2003, the Council has included representatives from such organizations as the Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, and the Southern Environmental Law Center. While TEPM has been well received by the public, the input of the Environmental Advisory Council has almost certainly been a major factor in crafting a document that successfully serves transportation professionals' needs while addressing the state's most important environmental issues.

TEPM can assist with:

- *Navigating* the NEPA process for Federally funded transportation projects
- *Performing* environmental evaluations for state-funded projects under the new TDOT-developed guidelines
- *Standardizing and Improving* environmental analyses and documents
- *Assessing* technical impacts of proposed projects

After providing an overview of relevant environmental regulations, TEPM takes a user-friendly, step-by-step approach to the different stages of environmental review, from project identification to the implementation of environmental commitments. A chapter on early coordination describes requirements outlined in SAFETEA-LU and the mandated procedures followed by federal and state agencies under the pending Tennessee Environmental Streamlining Agreement. Direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts, along with analyses required under various laws and regulations, are reviewed, along with basic procedures for involving the public in the planning process.

TEPM devotes significant attention to mitigation and environmental commitments related to project design and construction activities. A new Statewide Storm Water Management Plan submitted by the TDOT's Department of Environment and Conservation in May 2007 provides a major basis for this section. This cooperatively developed plan describes actions to limit and mitigate the impacts of erosion, sediment, and storm water caused by the state's highways.

TEPM is also a resource for preparing high-quality, reader friendly environmental documents, drawing on guidelines developed by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC), and FHWA and published in a report entitled *Improving the Quality of Environmental Documents*, dated June 23, 2006. (To access the report, visit the [AASHTO NEPA Process](#) website. The [September 2006](#) issue of *Successes in Stewardship* provides additional information on these guidelines.) Given the current focus on streamlined project analysis and review, TEPM is a major resource for transportation professionals, presenting the core principles of NEPA documents in an easy-to-understand format.

Applications for Other Stakeholders

Although TEPM was created by and for transportation professionals in Tennessee, it is also useful to individuals in other states who are interested in learning more about the environmental review process. TEPM's information on SAFETEA-LU revisions, public involvement, context-sensitive solutions, minimization and mitigation of impacts, and preparation of high-quality documentation can be applied to large and small projects in any state.

TEPM is updated regularly and is available online. To access the most recent version, go to <http://www.tdot.state.tn.us/environment/tepm.htm>. Sign up to receive updates by e-mailing your name and organizational affiliation to TEPM.Environmental@state.tn.us.

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New Guidance from Colorado on Linking Transportation Planning and NEPA

A new guidance document from the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) helps to demystify the linkages between transportation planning and NEPA processes. This guidance, issued in March of 2007, emphasizes that there should be two-way communication linking planning and NEPA: concepts from NEPA should be used during the corridor planning process, and information gathered during planning should be used during NEPA review. The guidance is intended to help planners "understand how to develop information and document decision-making processes during the transportation planning process in a manner that will allow for the inclusion of this information in the NEPA process and avoid redundant work."

An online tutorial based on the new guidance takes you through the planning and NEPA processes step by step. It includes an overview of Linking Planning and NEPA; applications such as corridor visioning, public involvement, and mitigation; and case studies from Colorado and other states. You can access and complete this online training at http://www.dot.state.co.us/environmental/Training/NEPA_index.asp.

Look What's New!

The FHWA Office of Project Development and Environmental Review, FHWA Office of Planning, Cambridge Systematics, and NatureServe are hosting workshops to improve linkages between conservation and transportation planning. The next workshop will take place November 13-14 at the North Central Texas Council of Governments. The Mid-America Regional Council and Oregon DOT will host additional workshops in early 2008.

Successes in Stewardship is a Federal Highway Administration newsletter highlighting current environmental streamlining and stewardship practices from around the country. To subscribe, visit http://environment.fhwa.dot.gov/sis_registration/Register.aspx or call 617-494-3137.