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September 2009

The Planning, Environment, Air Quality, and Realty Learning and Development Seminar: Bringing FHWA Disciplines Together

The Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Planning, Environment, Air Quality, and Realty (PEAR) Learning and Development Seminar, planned to address the training needs of the four key areas within FHWA's Office of Planning, Environment, and Realty, took place on August 31 through September 3, 2009. The four-day seminar, comprised of 64 sessions, provided an opportunity for Planning, Environment, Air Quality, and Realty specialists to participate in both topic-specific and multidisciplinary training. Over 320 FHWA staff from Headquarters, Division Offices, the Resource Center, and Federal Lands Highway attended. As part of FHWA's new Learning Highway training initiative, the PEAR Seminar helped staff to build and strengthen professional competencies so that they can continue to serve as national leaders within the transportation community.



The PEAR seal
(courtesy of FHWA)

Developing the PEAR Seminar

The Learning Highway concept was developed by FHWA in response to employees' expressed desire to acquire the skills necessary to perform their current jobs successfully as well as to meet FHWA's future needs. The Learning Highway contains three "routes," or concentrations: corporate, leadership, and professional. Learning and Development Seminars are part of the professional concentration, which focuses on technical competency-building. The seminars also address technical development gaps identified through the March 2009 FHWA Discipline Survey. The survey was developed to assess the strengths of the FHWA workforce and to identify areas where additional professional development opportunities would be useful.

FHWA's decision that the four discipline areas would converge in a joint seminar stemmed from the recognition that a number of field positions within the disciplines have crossover functions. The PEAR Seminar provided learning opportunities for these multidisciplinary positions, with sessions on topics such as climate change, livability, and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). FHWA leaders maintained a commitment to allow field staff to set the agenda since the seminar took the place of the traditional field-planner and environmental-specialist conferences. Planning committees were established within each discipline area, and requests for training suggestions were sent to the appropriate staff.

The PEAR Seminar agenda contained a separate track for each area with specific sessions selected for inclusion on the basis of an assessment of the importance of the issues.

PEAR Highlights

Christine Johnson, FHWA Director of Field Services, and John Halikowski, Director of the Arizona Department of Transportation, welcomed all the participants in a plenary session and encouraged them to make the most of opportunities offered through the sessions, networking, and the Learning Highway. FHWA Executive Director Jeff Paniati and Associate Administrator Gloria Shepherd hosted a later session on the development of the Fiscal Year 2010 Strategic Plan and the status of the next transportation authorization. Their remarks included the discussion of the top priorities within the USDOT and FHWA that include livability, climate change, and streamlining of the transportation decisionmaking process. Gloria and Jeff thanked participants for their commitment to meeting the goals of ARRA.

The first day of the seminar also featured a demonstration of the Realty Competency Building (RCB) Navigator, an innovative online tool that assists realty professionals in identifying key competency areas and serves as a centralized source of credible, up-to-date information on realty resources. Throughout the seminar, participants were asked to beta-test and provide feedback on the functionality of this tool to improve its utility.

Many PEAR sessions focused on climate change and livability, reflecting FHWA's unique ability to contribute achievements related to these USDOT priorities within all four areas. Relevant sessions included:

- *Emerging Air Quality Issues.* This session began with a question-and-answer (Q&A) opportunity on reauthorization issues related to air quality and climate change. The Q&A was followed by an overview of the new and revised National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) and a summary of ongoing rulemaking and guidance-development activities.
- *Livability and Cross-Program Linkages.* On the basis of Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood's prioritization of livability, this session focused on the components of livable communities and the importance of the integration of land use and transportation. Guest speakers Geoffrey Anderson from the Smart Growth Alliance and Barbara McCann from the National Complete Streets Coalition shared their thoughts on how to build livable communities through effective transportation decisions. The session also considered the new Sustainable Communities Initiative and the partnership among the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and USDOT.
- *Climate-Change Joint Session and Breakouts.* This plenary session consisted of a high-level discussion on climate-change science and legislation as well as FHWA efforts to combat climate change through new mitigation efforts and reauthorization proposals. Smaller breakout groups followed that addressed the relationship between climate change and issues such as livability, modeling, mitigation, adaptation, planning, and carbon sequestration.

PEAR: Building Professional Competencies

The PEAR Seminar allowed FHWA staff to collaborate and network in joint sessions and special breakout sessions on important issues that impact the delivery of transportation projects and programs. Sessions included both state-of-the-practice for established topics and emerging issues for the future of transportation decisionmaking. State-of-the-practice sessions highlighted current requirements and best practices for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Purpose and Need statements, transportation safety, Section 4(f), public participation, Transportation Management Area certification, transportation planning, Right-of-Way, and conformity, while emerging-issues sessions covered climate change, livability, and new tools such as the MOVES (Motor Vehicle Emission Simulator) model.

A major benefit of the PEAR Seminar was the opportunity for participants to meet and network with colleagues from different disciplines as well as from other States and regions. For FHWA Division staff, the seminar provided a natural setting for dialogue and cross-training with peers from other Divisions. Participants commented positively on learning about multidisciplinary issues and discussing how these issues impact their daily work. This initial PEAR Seminar provided a forum for multidisciplinary training as well as a deeper focus on specific areas.

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Look What's New!

Upcoming Transportation Related Events:

- The 2009 International Conference on Ecology and Transportation (ICOET) will be held in Duluth, MN from September 13 – 17, 2009. The conference hosted by the Minnesota Department of Transportation will focus on the topic "Adapting to Change." To learn more or to register, please visit the [ICOET Website](#).
- The 2009 National Preservation Conference will be held in Nashville, TN from October 13 - 17, 2009. The theme of this year's conference is "Sustaining the Future in Harmony with Our Pasts." To learn more, please visit the [conference website](#).
- The Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO) will hold its 2009 Conference from October 27 – 30, 2009 in Savannah, GA. This three day event brings together Policy Board Members, Executive Directors, technical staffs, Federal and State employees, and consultants to share information on a variety of MPO issues. To learn more about the conference visit the [AMPO website](#).