

Successes In Stewardship

Celebrating 10 Years

October 2011

FHWA Begins Development of a Community of Practice for Transportation Liaisons

Many Federal and State resource and regulatory agencies participate in liaison programs to enhance coordination with transportation agencies. Since 1998, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and State DOTs have provided funding to support transportation liaison positions through the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), the Water Resources Development Act of 2000 (WRDA), and the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). DOT funding allows staff in State or Federal resource and regulatory agencies to focus on streamlining the environmental review process and the delivery of transportation projects. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is working with transportation liaisons to develop a Community of Practice (CoP) that supports the environmental streamlining work of transportation liaisons and their managers.

In order to expedite transportation project review and delivery, transportation liaisons coordinate closely with DOTs at various stages of project development, including the permitting process and in Federal Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultation. FHWA has also funded national transportation liaison positions at the Headquarters levels of Federal agencies, including the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Forest Service. These Federal liaisons address national policies and issues, work with field offices to identify best practices, and share lessons learned and environmental streamlining strategies. Funded positions programs vary widely in terms of size and available funding. Some agencies have a single liaison, whereas other agencies have a team of liaisons.

Transportation liaisons also serve in non-funded positions, meaning their positions are not supported financially by U.S. DOT or State DOT funding. Transportation liaisons in non-funded positions, who are funded directly through the resource or regulatory agency for which they work, perform many of the same functions as their funded counterparts by streamlining the permitting process required for transportation projects, assisting State DOTs in implementing transportation projects, and developing process improvements.



This diagram identifies the key resources that transportation liaisons and liaison managers would like to see in a CoP.

In October 2009, FHWA conducted the [State Transportation Liaison Funded Positions Study](#), which evaluated the successes and challenges that State DOTs and Federal and State resource and regulatory agencies face in supporting funded position programs. The [January 2010](#) edition of *Successes in Stewardship* presented the results of this study. One key finding was that transportation liaisons in funded position programs do not have a forum for consulting with their peers

about challenges and sharing best practices. In addition to conducting the study, FHWA held peer exchanges for transportation liaisons in July and September 2009 to encourage collaboration and gather input from liaisons.

Based on the outcomes of the 2009 study and peer exchanges, FHWA decided to develop a nationwide transportation CoP. A CoP is a forum where people who have common interests can interact and share experiences and best practices in order to learn from each other. By fostering effective community ties and connecting people to peers, a CoP helps build knowledge and creates a network for collaboration among its members. It also supports a range of activities so that members can choose their level and frequency of participation. A successful CoP evolves to meet the shifting needs of its members.

In creating this CoP, FHWA aims to foster a peer network to support transportation liaisons in both funded and non-funded positions, as well as liaison managers, to encourage interactions and information-sharing nationwide. The CoP will enhance environmental streamlining by establishing a setting where liaisons and managers can discuss their work and share best practices of interagency collaboration at the local, State, regional, and national levels.

Identifying Issues and Interests

To begin the process of creating a CoP, FHWA sought direct feedback from transportation liaisons and liaison managers. FHWA, in conjunction with the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), conducted two online surveys to receive initial input from Federal and State transportation liaisons and liaison managers about how best to structure a transportation liaison CoP. Survey respondents indicated that they would participate in and benefit from the information-sharing and knowledge-building aspects of a transportation liaison CoP. The liaisons and managers noted an interest in learning about new topic areas and best practices from other agencies as well as discussing issues with peers on an as-needed basis. Additionally, they identified several key challenges they often face in their work as transportation liaisons or liaison managers, including addressing agency needs and expectations, project and program support, and communication across agencies.

In August 2011, at the International Conference on Ecology and Transportation (ICOET) in Seattle, WA, FHWA hosted two meetings to discuss the potential benefits and opportunities for a CoP. The first meeting was for transportation liaison managers at State DOTs and Federal and State regulatory and resource agencies. The objective of that meeting was to discuss successful administrative processes for developing and implementing a liaison position. Topics included the types of agreements used to establish liaison positions and descriptions of positive liaison experiences. Participants expressed a need to share performance information and interagency agreements with one another.

FHWA also led a meeting at ICOET of transportation liaisons in both funded and non-funded positions to discuss the utility of creating a CoP and a corresponding website. Participants expressed interest in a CoP that would manage an online calendar where liaisons could post and receive notifications of upcoming events; provide interactive webinars that foster discussions and allow participants to share best practices with their peers; establish a resource center where liaisons could post and search for material such as successful memorandums of understanding or programmatic agreements; and host “face-to-face” exchanges to promote a liaison network.

Participants also suggested additional CoP resources and frameworks for FHWA to consider implementing. These included having smaller, regional CoPs so that liaisons could interact with peers in the same region and discuss similar issues and challenges, developing a contact list in which liaisons list their “subject-matter specialties” to facilitate requests for technical assistance, organizing a universal way to track projects, and exploring social media tools.

Organizing a Framework for Collaboration

Using the feedback that it received from transportation liaisons and liaison managers, FHWA developed several goals to guide the formation of a transportation liaison CoP that fosters the community-building culture that liaisons seek. FHWA’s goals in forming a CoP for transportation liaisons are to:

- Identify the needs and interests of transportation liaisons and ensure that the CoP supports these needs and interests;
- Establish an interactive forum that provides accessible, searchable, intuitive, and clear guidance, information, and best practice examples for transportation liaisons;
- Provide training opportunities for new transportation liaisons; and
- Connect transportation liaisons with their peers to share challenges and lessons learned.

With the CoP goals in place, FHWA plans to establish a robust set of online resources and organize face-to-face opportunities for interaction to support the evolving needs and challenges of transportation liaisons and managers nationwide as components of a useful and long-lasting CoP. CoP resources may include:

- Webinars that share best practices and promote discussions among participants,
- A calendar that notifies liaisons of and allows participants to post important events,
- An online library that contains sample documents and online resources,
- A contact list of liaisons and their subject-matter specialties, and
- Listservs for liaisons and liaison managers to share information and ask questions.

Next Steps

FHWA plans to focus initially on (1) delivering regional webinars to liaisons and managers and (2) developing the web-based resources for the CoP, which will promote new ways of sharing information and best practices, support knowledge-building and training opportunities, and establish a forum for collaboration. Over time, the agency hopes to address liaisons' feedback about increasing the level of peer interaction through building face-to-face elements into the CoP. The CoP will be a set of resources that allow transportation liaisons to share ideas and best practices, collaborate and communicate frequently and effectively, and further promote environmental streamlining and efficient project delivery.

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Look What's New!

- The [Council on Environmental Quality \(CEQ\)](#) announced two new tools that deploy innovative approaches to improve the environmental review process under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) as part of the [CEQ NEPA Pilot Program](#). The U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service each developed tools that allow the public to submit comments on NEPA online and improve the agencies' ability to coordinate reviews and share related documents. CEQ plans to select several more pilot projects under the program in the future.
- The Washington State Department of Transportation released [a report](#) that introduces its Passage Assessment System, which helps agency staff evaluate how effectively existing transportation infrastructure facilitates terrestrial wildlife movement from one side of a roadway to the other. The report also includes a Passage Enhancement Toolbox that can help guide users in developing site-specific recommendations.

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