

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

Synthesizing Environmental Justice Planning Into Transportation Planning for Projects in the Southeastern United States Through Enhanced Public Involvement

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Background and Objectives: Although the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 has since its inception incorporated requirements for evaluation of potentially adverse social effects associated with federally funded transportation projects, the traditional interagency consultation and public involvement processes supporting NEPA have inadequately represented low-income and minority factions. This study strives to investigate the potential for infusing specific public involvement activities, techniques, and special accommodations to attract and sustain high-quality participation by at-risk groups in such a manner as to best integrate salient social dynamic information into the NEPA project recommendation.

Methods: Structured interviews with environmental justice (EJ) advocates, leaders representing business and faith-based communities, elected officials, representatives of key Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), State Departments of Transportation (DOT), and federal agencies within the Southeastern Region were supplemented by a 50+ question written survey that explored participation preferences and correlated specific techniques with successful project development. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)/Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Planning Certification Reviews monitored quality assurance of the MPO and DOT public involvement program efforts over 15 years. Interagency consultations pursuant to tribal, brownfields reclamation, Clean Water Act, and Clean Air Act conformity issues provide viable vehicles for continual refinement of best practices in EJ-directed public engagement.

Results: Neighborhood association and homeowners' association meetings, public hearings, informational open houses hosted by project sponsors, stakeholder meetings (beginning at the problem-identification stage of scoping), and planning charrettes are the most effective public involvement plan activities. They are most effective when generated using plain language and visualization techniques such as Visual Preference Surveys and computer animations. Sponsor provision of fully accessible facilities, transportation, childcare, and meals further enhances full participation by at-risk groups.

Conclusion: Communities (MPO, state and federal agencies [EPA, FHWA, ACHP, FTA, et al.]) can collectively influence enhancement of public involvement mechanisms through focused interagency consultation and development of plain language, highly visual presentation techniques using specifically identified high-value activities to attract participation by EJ at-risk groups to promote quality projects stimulating community cohesion, livability, and sustainability.