

200.01 Environmental Considerations in Transportation Planning

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Transportation planning plays a robust and fundamental role in the state, region, or community's vision for its future. It is a long-term approach (20 years) that includes a comprehensive consideration of possible strategies; an evaluation process that encompasses diverse viewpoints; the collaborative participation of relevant transportation-related agencies and organizations; and open, timely, and meaningful public involvement.

Everyone has an important role to play in planning: all aspects of WSDOT; the general public; community groups; the traveling public; citizens otherwise affected by transportation; Regional Transportation Planning Organizations; Metropolitan Planning Organizations; Tribes; and local, state, and federal governments. Transportation proponents will achieve significant benefits by incorporating environmental and community values into transportation decisions early in planning, and carrying these considerations through NEPA, project development and delivery.

This approach is typically referred to as "planning and environmental linkages," or PEL. Basically, the concept of PEL is to use what you learn during the planning process and apply the information to future transportation project; the project-level planning, design, development, and environmental analysis, on through to project fruition.

PEL benefits include:

- **Building Relationships** – By enhancing interagency participation, as well as coordination efforts and procedures during the planning process, transportation agencies use the PEL process to establish very important working relationships with resource agencies and the public.
- **Finding Efficiencies in The Processes** – building interagency relationships often helps resolve differences on key issues as transportation programs and projects move from planning to design and implementation. Taking a clear first look while conducting analyses during planning can reduce duplication of work, leading to reductions in costs and time requirements. More importantly, transportation leaders work with the public to determine the needs of the community that will inform the transportation system. In the end, needed transportation projects can be developed faster and with fewer issues.
- **On-The-Ground Outcomes** – When transportation agencies conduct planning activities equipped with information about resource considerations and while coordinating with resource agencies and the public, they are better able to create multimodal transportation systems, programs and projects that effectively serve the community's transportation needs. This can reduce negative impacts, and incorporates more effective environmental stewardship.¹

¹More information about Federally required planning processes can be found at this web site: https://www.planning.dot.gov/documents/briefingbook/bbook_07.pdf

As noted above, planning studies conducted before projects are funded provide excellent information intended to identify environmental issues and areas that require further study. Project proponents are expected to refer to existing planning studies and confer with the appropriate planning agencies before moving too far into environmental analysis or project development.

A PEL approach:

- Extends outreach efforts to include resource professionals and interest groups, and provides forums to which to invite members of the public.
- Focuses alternatives screening and uses the Least Cost Planning Process.
- Evaluates the connection between planning and NEPA topics, such as social and economic issues, cumulative impacts, mitigation considerations, and more.
- Aligns planning terms with similar NEPA terms in documentation.

In general, the complexity of projects will define the extent of NEPA analysis – that is, whether the project will require a Categorical Exclusion (CE), Environmental Assessment (EA) or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The complexity of the project will often be decided in planning, through evaluating alternatives at an early level, and deciding which reasonable alternatives much move forward. Typically, larger, more controversial, or more complex projects will benefit the most from following a PEL process. Projects classified as CE typically follow a less complex process, but will still comply with the practical design process outlined in *Design Manual* Chapter 1100. In either case, detailed environmental documentation is developed during the project design phase after funding has been secured and after the project scope and purpose have been established and endorsed by the community. Environmental concerns previously identified in planning studies inform the least-cost planning and practical design processes by setting the environmental context as described in the *Design Manual* Chapter 1102.

WSDOT planning studies themselves are categorically exempt under SEPA ([WAC 197-11-800\(17\)](#) and [WAC 468-12-800\(3\)](#)). A planning study may identify opportunities to avoid or minimize environmental impacts or identify unacceptable environmental consequences. Both Federal NEPA and the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) prohibit actions that would limit the choice of reasonable alternatives until after completion of the environmental analysis (NEPA/SEPA) process ([WAC 197-11-070](#)). Therefore, planning studies cannot preclude consideration of *reasonable* alternatives. As noted above, reasonable alternatives must be forwarded into the NEPA/SEPA process where they are considered as part of the environmental review and documentation process.

The environmental analysis generated during the planning process should be reviewed during project scoping. This information is particularly helpful in establishing the environmental context for the project, identifying controversial issues, and can expedite environmental review and permitting.

WSDOT must comply with primary planning statutes and regulations to receive state and federal funds.