Environmental Streamlining on the STEP UP Project

Environmental Stewardship & Streamlining
TRB Conference
September 11-14, 2005
NFRMPO Responsibilities

- Objective: “to provide the information, tools and public input needed for improving the regional transportation system’s performance in the North Front Range”
- Prepares Regional Transportation Plan
- Prepares Transportation Improvement Program
Regional Transportation Plan

- Previous RTPs (2020 & 2025) attempted to include environmental assessment criteria in the Project Prioritization Process (PPP)
- The 2030 RTP does not include environmental assessment criteria due to a lack of information
- Projects identified for inclusion in the TIP
- Environmental review of a project doesn’t start until after it is identified in the TIP
Issues with the Current RTP Process

- Does not effectively address environmental considerations
- Lack of resource agency involvement during the planning stage
- Time and cost impacts to project due to unknown environmental issues
- NEPA review struggles with accommodating projects rather than a best fit
- Environment review starts after project moves into the TIP
What is STEP UP?

- Strategic Transportation, Environmental and Planning Process for Urbanizing Places
- Environmental Streamlining Pilot Project in Colorado in response to Section 1309 of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21).
- A partnership between FHWA, FTA, CDOT, EPA, and the NFR MPO
- Funded by FHWA Colorado Division; funds administered by CDOT
- Carter & Burgess hired in April 2004
Purpose

➢ To increase consideration of environmental impacts and resource agency involvement early in the transportation planning process
➢ To help ensure that projects proceed more quickly through NEPA documentation during the project development phase
STEP UP Objectives

- Improve project evaluation on environmental issues in the Regional Planning Process
- Full and early participation of all relevant agencies that must review a transportation improvement or issue a permit, license, and opinion relating to the project.
- Improved NEPA decision-making
  - Environmental decisions will be streamlined and hopefully enhanced through better coordination and more informed decision-making.
  - Make better, timelier decisions while in the planning stages with early identification and consideration of environmental impacts and issues.
Model Planning Process

- Early and continuous Resource Agency involvement
- Guidelines for environmental review and prioritization of projects in the RTP process
- Development of GIS-based tools for identifying the environmental impacts of transportation projects and plans early on.
- Environmental screening of corridors and projects before the NEPA process
- Incorporation of a cumulative effects assessment process for NFRMPO’s Regional Transportation Plan
Environmental Database (all) - includes the natural, built and social environment.

Environmental Database layers may include: Land use, farmland, demographics, transportation system, air quality, water resources, floodplains, wetlands, vegetation, wildlife including T&E, historic properties, 4(f)/6(f) properties.

Comprehensive Local Planning (Local jurisdictions)

Regional Environmental Review (RA/CDOT)

Corridor Assessment & Visions Review (MPO)

RTP Project Submittal (MPO members)

Project Prioritization and Screening Process (MPO)

RTP Document
- Vision Plan
- Fiscally Constrained Plan (MPO)

Pre-TIP Environmental Review & Scoping (RA/FHWA/CDOT/Project Sponsor)

TIP/STIP Document (MPO/CDOT)

Regional CEA of Fiscally Constrained Plan (CDOT)

Project Development
- NEPA Documentation Process
- Permitting
- Preliminary Design
- ROW Acquisition
- Final Design
- Construction (CDOT/Project Sponsor)

Note: Some of the actions in the process may occur concurrently. Steps indicate a logical flow, but not chronological.
GIS Tool

- Template created for Statewide use
- Dependent on data repository, which needs full participation of Resource Agencies to develop the relevant data
- Requires staffing and equipment (server, software, etc) with ongoing funding
GIS Tool Framework
Normalization of Environmental Resource
Viewing of Environmental Resource
Corridor Definition Interface

Current Page: Home \ List Corridors \ Edit Corridor

TPR: North Front Range MPO

Name: North I-25

Primary Investment Category: System Quality

Attributes:
- System Quality: High Importance
- Safety: Moderate Importance
- Mobility: Low Importance
- Strategic Projects: High Importance

Vision:
This corridor will be a significant trade route between Canada and Mexico City.

Goals:
- Higher speeds, wider lanes, less cars, more trucks, fewer interchanges!

Strategies:
- Higher speeds, wider lanes, less cars, more trucks, fewer interchanges!

Location Description:
US I-25 from milemarker 0 to milemarker 250.
Environmental Screening

- Using environmental GIS data, evaluate environmental impacts of a corridor
- Identify cumulative and environmental issues that may affect the project’s priority, alignment or features
- Early assessment of environmental effects for NEPA documentation
RCEA Process

- Identify regional resources of concern for cumulative effects
- Identify data needs
- Establish thresholds for resources
- Identify impacts of RTP on identified resources
- Identify impacts of land use changes on identified resources
Benefits to Stakeholders

- Integrated long-term project planning promotes stewardship by taking environmental issues into account up front
- Predictable and timely approval process
- More comprehensive regional planning
- Improved project selection
- Improved project cost and time line
Implementation Steps

- Create a regional environmental database with as many layers as possible
  - Statewide environmental geodatabase under development by the University of Colorado at Denver
  - Additional datasets developed by consultants for a number of corridor studies, especially the North I-25 EIS

- Create formalized partnerships agreements with Resource Agencies

- Development of the Modified Regional Transportation Planning (RTP) process
Implementation Steps…

- Development of a web based application to support revised planning process
- Test existing RCEA models
  - Models already developed by the University of Colorado at Denver
  - Regional cumulative effects analysis for the North Front Range
  - These models do not represent a complete RCEA, but their effectiveness could be tested and demonstrated in an initial assessment of the regional environment
Current Status of STEP UP

- Final Phase I Report is complete
- The development of an implementation plan for the North Front Range MPO by Spring 2006 which includes:
  - Targeted environmental data acquisition
  - Resource agency outreach and agreements
  - Stakeholder buy-in from local government elected officials and staff.
  - Modified RTP Process
- Phase II consists of conducting a pilot project using the methodologies and tools developed in Phase I
STEP UP Phase I Report is available at:
http://www.nfrmpo.org/pdfs/PhaseIReport_v4.pdf
http://www.dot.state.co.us/Publications/PDFFiles/stepup.pdf

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Thank You