

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input for the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) review of existing policy statements, guidance documents, and regulations to identify unnecessary obstacles to transportation infrastructure projects.

Our organizations have extensive experience participating in the project review process for identifying and protecting historic resources, with particular experience with reviews required under section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (54 USC 306108) and section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act (49 USC Section 303). We have worked extensively with DOT, state transportation agencies, industry, and other stakeholders to find common-sense efficiencies in the review process, such as the section 4(f) *de minimis* approval option, and we are glad to share further insight. We support DOT's efforts to make the project approval process for transportation infrastructure projects more predictable, consistent, and efficient while ensuring that the agency strikes an appropriate balance between development and preservation goals, in accordance with the intent Congress expressed in NHPA and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and transportation legislation (SAFETEA-LU, MAP-21, and FAST Act).

## **HOW TO IMPROVE PROJECT DELIVERY WHILE MAINTAINING PROTECTIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND HISTORIC RESOURCES**

As noted in a 2014 Government Accountability Office [report](#) to Congress, the Council on Environmental Quality estimates that the overwhelming majority (95%) of all NEPA-required analyses are "categorically excluded" (CE) from more comprehensive review. Of the remaining five percent of projects, CEQ estimates about four percent are subject to a more rigorous Environmental Assessment, and less than one percent go through an Environmental Impact Statement, the most thorough environmental project review. The report also noted that the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) estimates 96% of highway projects were processed as CEs. The majority of transportation projects, therefore, move quickly and efficiently through the environmental and historic preservation review process.

The primary reasons for the small number of DOT projects that are unnecessarily delayed or prevented are not related to DOT rules or regulations. Rather, our shared experience indicates the following obstacles are more likely to cause project delay:

- Lack of adequate and predictable project funding
- Changing state and local transportation priorities
- Local community opposition and/or poor public involvement
- Poor project planning and design
- Perverse incentives in infrastructure project development, usually resulting from inefficient contracting structures and processes

In our experience, delays, increased project costs, and poor project outcomes occur not because of legal requirements, but because of inconsistent or inappropriate implementation of DOT regulations, rules, policy statements and guidance for environmental and historic preservation reviews. Thus, improving the implementation and application of rules and regulations is the best

way to ensure efficient project delivery while maintaining appropriate protections for environmental and historic resources.

Furthermore, numerous existing tools are available to DOT-funded project sponsors to streamline historic preservation review and expedite project delivery. For example, many state departments of transportation have developed early planning tools and procedures that identify potential conflicts early in the planning process, avoiding costly delays and potential project conflicts and controversy before significant investments are made. We discuss these tools below, and recommend that their use be increased and promulgated throughout the Department of Transportation.

## **EXISTING STREAMLINING TOOLS SHOULD BE SUPPORTED AND ADOPTED ACROSS THE DEPARTMENT**

There are a large number of existing, effective tools for streamlining historic preservation reviews and expediting project delivery. These tools, which are often linked to overall environmental review procedures, have been developed by the Department (especially the FHWA) and many state DOTs, in partnership with State Historic Preservation Offices, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), federally-recognized Tribes, and other stakeholders.

We provide links to reports and studies on these tools, along with links to state-specific programs that created and/or use these tools, which include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Cultural resources Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and associated electronic environmental and historic preservation screening tools and decision-making systems (NCHRP 25-25, Task 90<sup>1</sup>, FHWA Planning and Environmental Linkages for Historic Preservation<sup>2</sup>, Florida DOT's Efficient Transportation Decision Making Process<sup>3</sup>, Minnesota DOT's MnModel<sup>4</sup>)
- Electronic documentation and tracking of environmental and historic preservation reviews (Florida DOT StateWide Environmental Project Tracker<sup>5</sup>, Texas DOT's Texas Environmental Compliance Oversight System<sup>6</sup>)
- Programmatic agreements that delegate decision making to the state DOTs (NCHRP 25-25, Task 49<sup>7</sup>, FHWA Planning and Environmental Linkages for Historic Preservation)
- Programmatic agreements identifying classes of transportation projects that do not require review or are reviewed under a streamlined and expedited process (NCHRP 25-25, Task 49)
- Electronic communication and documentation of consultation with the public (Pennsylvania DOT's ProjectPath<sup>8</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> <http://apps.trb.org/cmsfeed/TRBNetProjectDisplay.asp?ProjectID=3719>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/histpres/recommend.asp>

<sup>3</sup> <https://etdmpub.flas-dot.org/est/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.dot.state.mn.us/mnmodel/P3FinalReport/final\\_report.html](http://www.dot.state.mn.us/mnmodel/P3FinalReport/final_report.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.fdot.gov/environment/sched/track2.shtm>

<sup>6</sup> <https://static.tti.tamu.edu/conferences/tsc13/presentations/environment/kolla-sykes.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/archive/NotesDocs/25-25%2849%29\\_FR.pdf](http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/archive/NotesDocs/25-25%2849%29_FR.pdf)

- Guidance on the preparation of concise, legally sufficient environmental documents (AASHTO Handbook on Preparing High-Quality NEPA Documents for Transportation Projects<sup>9</sup>)
- Consideration of historic preservation factors during long range planning (NCHRP 25-25, Task 87<sup>10</sup>)

As a result of the use of these and other tools, and because of the streamlining mandates in SAFETEA-LU and MAP-21, the Department and state DOTs have, over the last several years, reduced the time and costs associated with project delivery. In addition, the FAST Act includes several new streamlining measures that have yet to be fully implemented. These include, but are not limited to:

- Exempting a common class of post-1945 historic bridges from Section 4(f) review (Section 1303);
- Exempting the use of elements of railroad and rail transit lines from a Section 4(f) approval (Section 11502); and
- Exemption of railroad rights-of-way from review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (Section 11504). The latter exemption cannot be currently used until the ACHP prepares a formal exemption similar to the one prepared for the Interstate Highway System (70 Fed. Reg. 11928).

## **FURTHER ACTIONS TO STREAMLINE AND IMPROVE EFFICIENCIES IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEWS**

We recommend that DOT pursue the following approaches to remove obstacles to development of transportation infrastructure and make NEPA and NHPA reviews more efficient:

- 1) Complete the mandates of the FAST Act, especially those that relate to rail projects, and fully implement the recommendations of the March 2013 report to Congress from the Federal Rail Administration (FRA)
  - FRA provided a [Report](#) to Congress in March 2013 recommending streamlining procedures and efficiencies for federally-funded railroad infrastructure repair and improvement projects. Some of these procedures and efficiencies were included in the FAST Act, such as mandating the FRA coordinate with the ACHP to prepare a formal exemption similar to the one prepared for the Interstate Highway System. Putting this exemption in place will clearly streamline future historic preservation reviews. Some of the recommended procedures and efficiencies identified in the March 2013 report were not included in the FAST Act and should be pursued. For example, FRA and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) should adopt their own programmatic Section 4(f) evaluations, modeled after FHWA's programmatic evaluations<sup>11</sup>. And as noted in the March 2013 report to

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.paprojectpath.org/home>

<sup>9</sup> [http://environment.transportation.org/center/products\\_programs/practitioners\\_handbooks.aspx#14](http://environment.transportation.org/center/products_programs/practitioners_handbooks.aspx#14)

<sup>10</sup> <http://apps.trb.org/cmsfeed/TRBNetProjectDisplay.asp?ProjectID=3512>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/4f/4fnationwideevals.asp>

Congress, FRA is not covered by 23 CFR 774, which is a joint FHWA and FTA Section 4(f) regulation. We recommend that FRA should be covered by this regulation, and be encouraged to use the efficiencies included in this regulation.

- 2) Enforce concurrent review guidelines already available for agencies' reviews
  - MAP-21 directs agencies to coordinate and carry out reviews concurrently, instead of sequentially, in conjunction with the NEPA review process. Similarly, Title 41 of the FAST Act (FAST-41) requires state and federal permitting reviews run concurrently for a "covered project," provided that doing so does not impair a federal agency's ability to review the project.
- 3) Issue specific guidance for section 1312 of the FAST Act, with emphasis on strongly encouraging state DOTs and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) to use a small part of the federal transportation funds they receive "to support activities that directly and meaningfully contribute to expediting and improving permitting and review processes, including planning, approval, and consultation processes." Final guidance should provide examples of activities and best practices to maximize return on this investment and make the planning, approval and consultation process as efficient as possible.

It is imperative that DOT takes full advantage of this new authority under section 1312 of FAST to urge state DOTs and MPOs to use the federal transportation funds they receive "to support activities that directly and meaningfully contribute to expediting and improving permitting and review processes, including planning, approval, and consultation processes." While it is widely acknowledged that transportation funding is tight, and many state DOTs and MPOs may be reluctant to expend their limited transportation dollars on activities and personnel not perceived as directly related to transportation projects, the success of programs implemented by a number of innovative state DOTs and MPOs should serve as useful models to guide their decisions. Strong encouragement by DOT in its implementation guidance for section 1312 currently under development will go a long way toward wider use of federal transportation funds by state DOTs and MPOs for transportation planning, environmental review, dedicated staffing, agency personnel training, information gathering and mapping, and programmatic agreement development in broad and flexible ways.

The ultimate objective of section 1312 is to speed up delivery of transportation projects while protecting historic resources and the environment from potential adverse impacts. Our organizations previously provided DOT an extensive [list of suggested activities](#) eligible for funding under section 1312, including examples of state DOTs utilizing such activities.

- 4) Fund efforts to digitize historic resource surveys for state historic preservation and tribal historic preservation offices so that a complete record of inventory of historic places is available in GIS format. According to an April 2014 survey of SHPOs across the country conducted by the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, only 52% of inventoried historic resources in our nation have been digitized. Of these digitized

resources, a much smaller percentage is linked to a GIS-based database (most are simply scanned pages of paper reports).

In addition to digitizing existing databases, DOT should expand its support for predictive models that anticipate where cultural resources are likely to be discovered. A GIS tool that accurately predicts areas of high, medium, and low risk for encountering such cultural resources will allow DOT planners to plan projects in ways that avoid or minimize adverse impacts—leading to shortened review times and expedited project schedules. We note that DOT has funded such models in Florida, Minnesota, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas.

- 5) Increase use of programmatic approaches to environmental and historic preservation reviews.
- 6) Improve and make universal the merging of NEPA and Clean Water Act 404 permitting processes, with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issuing a 404 permit at the end of the NEPA process, based on the information generated by NEPA.
- 7) Improve public involvement and conduct public involvement during project planning stages and early stages of project development. This provides the public an early opportunity to voice concerns about project impacts on their community, which than can be addressed early in project development, thus avoiding or reducing subsequent controversies and conflicts, and reducing potential for litigation.

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