

EJ Project Level Challenges - Recap and Discussion

AASHTO – Center for Environmental Excellence Conference Call Summary

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On October 31, 2017, the Center for Environmental Excellence hosted a conference call with 69 participants to provide a recap and follow-up to the Environmental Justice sessions at AMPO's Annual Meeting. Speakers from the session provided an overview of their presentations, summarized the tabletop discussions with MPO's, and discussed key-takeaways for the Community of Practice.

Presentation Recap:

John Sherrill, Socio-Economic Specialist from the Illinois Department of Transportation described two scenarios. He presented the scenarios and lessons learned from each. The first scenario was regarding a railroad project located in Cook County (where Chicago is located). The project was going to double the set of tracks to allow the area to handle 103 trains per day. The minority percentage in Cook County is 56.9%. The lesson learned was that it is a misconception to conclude that if a project's impacts are equally distributed to a minority population, there are no disproportionate impacts. If a project is located in an area that has a meaningful low income or minority population; then, a nearby reference community needs to be found.

The second scenario was regarding a 13-mile expressway reconstruction project located in Cook County. The project planned to add one new toll lane in each direction and a bus only express lane to relieve current traffic congestion. This 13-mile portion of the expressway was originally constructed 60 years ago. The lessons learned were in regard to defining the Study Area. It requires several discussions and input from many entities. The project will affect an area well beyond one-half mile, and needs to account for employment centers, transit centers, and detours.

Abby Harris from Tennessee DOT discussed a proposed roadway extension near downtown Chattanooga. The community impacted is predominately African-American residential neighborhood, Lincoln Park, to the east of the project area. The proposed project extension would act as an I-24 connector, creating a heavily trafficked industrial corridor in the current residential area. The project gathered input from interested citizens and groups. The lessons learned included the added value from the knowledge and resources of local residents and that being underprepared can cost valuable time and resources. The residents were concerned about future impacts the roadway extension would have on their community; ease of access would allow for future growth in the area. Residents utilized their knowledge of the area and local resources to push designers to create project alternatives that would better meet their needs while maintaining the purpose and need of the project.

Ryan Perry with the Office of Environmental Services at the Georgia Department of Transportation discussed a pedestrian improvement project. At this particular location, there had been 47 pedestrian-vehicle collisions in two-year period resulting in 40 injuries and seven deaths. Outreach results revealed different needs/concerns within different communities. Hispanic community concerned with pedestrian operations and safety, number of crosswalks, vehicle speed, number of bus tops, etc. Asian community concerned with effects of medians on business operations, danger of U-turns, delayed emergency vehicle response. The project came up with some innovative ways to get messages to the impacted community, including partnering with schools and using children to spread messages. Lessons learned

were in regard to community input and relationship building. Key take-aways: Find out from communities how they prefer to interact with DOT; Kiosks w/ incentives at community/cultural events; Change to public comment cards (no address/identifying information); form lasting partnerships with community organizations; let the community take lead of education efforts.

Discussion Recap:

The session also included small breakout group discussions. Gloria Jeff, Wichita Area Metropolitan Planning Organization and John Sherill provided a summary of the key theme that emerged from the discussions:

- Someone needs to initiate communication between DOTs and MPOs. Communication is key and all impacted agencies should be involved in project planning.
- A better understanding EJ analysis itself is needed. More training focused on how to do an EJ analysis. A toolkit or “how to” manual with a step-by-step process would be helpful for guidance and consistency. This would go a step further than classes about what is required.

Conference Call Discussion/Question and Answer:

Rashaud Joseph with the Alaska DOT Civil Rights Office asked a question about which stage of project planning this should be done in. Respondents agreed that engagement and communication should take place at the pre-construction phase of the project. Mr. Joseph also asked if most DOTs are being involved in the NEPA process. Each state varies on its specific involvement and requirements, however all agreed that including highway partners should be a part of the process.