

AASHTO NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP COMPETITION

Please check the appropriate category for which you are submitting the application:

Category: Project
 Program
 Institutionalization/Organization Change

Application Title: North Carolina Department of Transportation
 Environmental Leadership

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*In no more than five pages, please provide the following information**. Although the same questions are asked for each category of application, the answers should appropriately focus on the type of stewardship application being submitted.

In answering, please respond in order and number your response to coincide with the numbers of the questions/topics listed below. Also, please utilize the text boxes that appear beneath each of the questions. The boxes will expand automatically as you enter your information.

1. 1. Describe the project/program/initiative/policy, including when it was initiated and its current status. (adopted plan or policy, completed construction, etc)

In recent years the leadership within the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) has taken remarkable strides in guiding, encouraging and allocating resources for environmental stewardship and streamlining. Specifically, NCDOT's leadership has institutionalized and heightened the importance of environmental stewardship through policy, organizational structure, strategic planning, process improvement and partnering. The senior leadership at NCDOT is committed to providing for North Carolina's transportation needs while protecting the State's environmental resources. This commitment is visible in a number of initiatives and projects undertaken throughout the department. Some of the key leadership developments include:

- • The appointment of the department's first Deputy Secretary for Environment, Planning, and Local Government Affairs;
- • The creation of the North Carolina Board of Transportation's first environmental committee (see Environmental Planning and Policy Committee

website at www.ncdot.org/board/committees/envcomm/);

- • The appointment by the Governor of the first Transportation Board Member with the designated responsibility of representing environmental issues;
- • Inclusion of environmental stewardship goals in NCDOT's Strategic Plan
- • The establishment of the department's Environmental Stewardship Policy;
- • The creation of NCDOT's Office of Environmental Quality (OEQ).

Further, with North Carolina Governor Mike Easley's support for more effective and efficient working relationships, NCDOT has embarked on several partnerships with resource agencies, including the NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to better serve the people of our state and foster the growth of healthy and safe communities statewide. DENR's Secretary Bill Ross, DENR's Chief Deputy Secretary Dempsey Benton, NCDOT's Secretary Lyndo Tippet and NCDOT's Deputy Secretary Roger Sheats as a group serve as a national model for interagency leadership and partnering for environmental stewardship and streamlining.

2. 2. Describe the context within which this project/program/initiative was implemented. For example, was it implemented in response to public opposition to agency actions, legislative mandate, agency leadership, staff initiative, etc?

Environmental stewardship within NCDOT became a primary focus in 1999 when NCDOT's *Strategic Plan for Transportation* was developed and adopted through public and stakeholder input. The plan outlines numerous goals that reflect stewardship of the human and natural environments.

In 2001, building off the excellent foundation of previous departmental efforts, the leadership of NCDOT formalized partnerships with state and federal resource agencies with the purpose of setting common environmental and transportation goals. These partnerships included those with DENR and USACE. This initial collaborative effort was formalized in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding which established a mission that supports environmental stewardship and responsible and timely transportation decision-making (see Attachment I). Senior management at these agencies recognized that the key to success hinges on establishing and maintaining trust at all levels within and between agencies, communicating effectively, and providing the resources to undertake initiatives that support specific goals. In addition, the leadership has established partnerships with other state and federal agencies, as well as the private sector, to leverage support and encourage active participation, thereby increasing the potential for success.

The public expects – and demands – quality transportation and environmental protection. While these two goals are often perceived as being conflicting, our leadership and department feels strongly that it is our responsibility as a state agency to provide a transportation system that does not compromise the quality of the environment. NCDOT's recognition of this mission is reflected in NCDOT's *Strategic Plan for Transportation* and our Environmental Stewardship Policy (see Attachment II).

NCDOT has also been chosen by the Federal Highway Administration as a "TEA-21

Environmental Streamlining Laboratory”, serving a model for other states. Our department views environmental stewardship as a necessary part of environmental streamlining. In order to deliver our transportation projects more efficiently, we must make decisions that demonstrate our care for the environment – both natural and human. Decision-making must be consistent with a sound environmental ethic and based on clearly documented and understood policies and processes and adequate information to make timely decisions that are in the public’s best overall interest. Our department’s leadership, coupled with state and federal partnerships,

demonstrates our commitment to delivering transportation projects without compromising the quality of the environment.

3. 3. Describe the process that was followed in implementing the project/program/initiative, with special emphasis given to participation of key partners.

As noted above, the initial department commitment of focusing significantly on environmental stewardship began as part of the development and adoption of our departmental strategic plan. This process included participation by key stakeholders and organizations and included several goals relating to stewardship natural and human resources.

The current NCDOT administration, appointed in 2001, began a complete institutionalization of the commitment to environmental stewardship. In doing so, the organizational structure was altered with the appointment of a Deputy Secretary for Environment, Planning and Local Governmental Affairs to oversee environmental activities and later, the creation of a unit (the Office of Environmental Quality) to coordinate all environmental stewardship activities department-wide. The Governor appointed a Board Member to represent environmental issues and to chair the first-ever Environmental Planning and Policy Committee on the Board of Transportation. All of these examples exhibit a long-term commitment for environmental stewardship at the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

NCDOT leadership has also nurtured trusting partnerships with their counterparts at other resource agencies. Most notable is the partnership between NCDOT and DENR, as demonstrated by monthly senior staff coordination meetings, the development of one-year and three-year joint workplans, process improvement initiatives, indirect and cumulative impact analysis guidance, the River Basin Signing Program, a delegated Sedimentation and Erosion Control Program, GIS database system development and maintenance, and the funding of positions by NCDOT within DENR.

4. 4. What are the major characteristics of this project/program/initiative that relate most readily to environmental stewardship?

Evidence of the environmental leadership displayed by NCDOT’s administration can be seen in the numerous environmental stewardship and streamlining initiatives that have been undertaken. Most notable are the process improvement efforts in the areas of environmental permitting and wetland, stream, and buffer mitigation that

have been cooperatively initiated by DENR, USACE, and NCDOT. Senior leadership of the three agencies served as sponsors for these process improvement initiatives and solicited the partnership of other state and federal resource agencies to make substantive changes to increase the efficiency of the processes without compromising the quality of the environment. Other active participants in these efforts include the Environmental Protection Agency, US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, NC Wildlife Resources Commission, and NC Department of Cultural Resources. Since the environmental permitting and mitigation processes are shared, leadership believed it was imperative that all the stakeholders come together to ensure that the improvements appropriately addressed the challenges that all the process participants were experiencing. These initiatives have required an intense commitment of resources and are improving the quality of the decision-making process and the outcomes of transportation projects. In addition, the initiatives have gone a long way to enhance communication and build effective, trusting working relationships between NCDOT and the resource agencies.

NCDOT leadership has also partnered with organizations to purchase environmentally sensitive tracks of land that were subject to developmental pressure. NCDOT and DENR, in cooperation with the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, recently purchased Bird Island in Brunswick County on North Carolina's southern coast. This 147-acre island, which is surrounded by about 1100 acres of marshland, is now part of the state's Coastal Reserve Program. Bird Island will serve as a sanctuary for birds, sea turtles and rare plants and will now be preserved from development forever.

NCDOT also participated in the collaborative purchase of two view sheds along the Blue Ridge Parkway in the Appalachian Mountains in western North Carolina (a National Byway) with assistance from the federal Enhancement Program. The Conservation Trust of North Carolina, a non-profit organization, also played an important role in acquiring these properties, one which is now part of the North Carolina State Parks system and the other which was gifted to the Blue Ridge Parkway.

In 2002, senior leadership also announced the acquisition of 2,500 acres of land in Hoke County, North Carolina to establish a preserve for the federally-endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. This acquisition will not only preserve numerous colonies of woodpeckers – and possibly increase their numbers – but will also link together an important ecosystem of long leaf pines throughout the Southeast. Only 2% of this ecosystem still remains. NCDOT also acquired a site in Tyrrell County, North Carolina that will preserve 9732 acres woodpecker habitat.

Also in 2002, NCDOT embarked on a new partnership with DENR and the USACE called the Ecosystem Enhancement Program (EEP). The mission of the EEP is to protect the natural resources of North Carolina through the assessment, restoration, enhancement and preservation of ecosystem functions and to compensate for transportation and private sector developmental impacts at the watershed level. This new program will be a national model for environmental stewardship and

streamlining when fully operational in 2005.

Most notably, the Board of Transportation and NCDOT Secretary Lyndo Tippet adopted the department's first Environmental Stewardship Policy. This policy was developed department-wide and encourages each employee to practice environmental stewardship in his or her day-to-day responsibilities (see attachment).

These efforts, coupled with those described in Items 1-3 above, demonstrate NCDOT's commitment to environmental stewardship.

5. 5. Describe why you believe this project/program/initiative represents a long-term commitment to environmental stewardship in your agency.

NCDOT has numerous environmental stewardship activities that have been institutionalized through development of departmental policy, changes in organizational structure, development of formal and informal partnerships, process improvement and redesign, strategic planning, and performance measurement. These initiatives have been undertaken largely through partnerships with other resource agencies and stakeholders. This type of stakeholder involvement ensures that the changes being made are supported and sustainable.

Through these efforts, the department is committing to a cultural change that encompasses a higher environmental ethic than ever before. Field personnel and central staff are embracing the environmental initiatives with initiation and choice. NCDOT's leadership is committed to nurturing an environmental ethic and has stated that NCDOT's mission is to provide an integrated transportation system that enhances the state's well being and to protect the natural and human environment. Further, the environmental Stewardship Policy, approved by the Board of Transportation and signed by the Transportation Secretary, stresses the importance of balancing daily operations and environmental responsibility and strongly encourages each employee to incorporate the principles of safety, environmental stewardship and customer focus into our daily activities.

6. 6. What measures of success have been used to determine overall effectiveness of the project/program/initiative in meeting environmental stewardship goals. If the project/program/initiative has not yet been implemented, what measures will be used to determine such effectiveness?

Senior management from NCDOT, DENR, and USACE have established monthly Senior Staff Meetings where strategic issues about transportation and the environment are discussed. Several emerging issues, such as secondary and cumulative impact assessment and air quality conformity, have been successfully resolved by leadership in a manner that meets the public purpose missions of the agencies. Together, leadership has identified specific goals and strategies for their partnership, which are documented in one-year and three-year work plans. The work plans are jointly prepared by the agencies and outline specific measures and commitments for the environment within North Carolina. The leadership team works closely to set priorities for agency staff for alignment between and within the agencies and monitors progress.

Additionally, NCDOT recently created the Office of Environmental Quality (OEQ)

to coordinate and promote environmental stewardship and streamlining throughout the department. The unit will serve as an internal consultant to coordinate, advocate, and provide oversight for environmental initiatives. One of the OEQ's key responsibilities is to coordinate NCDOT's environmental stewardship by measuring performance of environmental initiatives, programs, and processes. The benefits that are be gained from the proactive and strategic activities associated with the office include:

- ▪ Predictable project schedules and costs
- ▪ Decreased time to deliver projects
- ▪ Increased customer satisfaction and accountability
- ▪ Change in the culture of the organization as it pertains to environmental performance

7. 7. Describe why you believe your project/program/initiative represents “best practice” and should be recognized with a national award.

The leadership of NCDOT has been crucial to the implementation and success of numerous environmental stewardship activities. Through communication, policy, organizational structure, strategic planning, processes and relationship building, NCDOT continually strives to improve the department's environmental stewardship ethic. NCDOT's ability to partner with stakeholders to create common goals and creatively share resources to achieve them serves as a national model. The development of new tools, improved processes, and enhanced working relationships are the keys to responsible transportation decision-making and the protection and enhancement of North Carolina's precious environmental resources.

The application must be signed by the Chief Executive Officer of the DOT or his or her designee.