Title
Reinventing how WSDOT carries out the reinvention of the national environmental policy act paper prepared by the interagency process improvement team

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/07w1v4x0

Author
Manning, Sandra

Publication Date
2001-09-24
Abstract

Over the past year, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) has sponsored a process improvement team to improve the way the department conducts NEPA environmental review processes. A primary focus of this effort has been to reduce the likelihood that decisions made during the process will be revisited or discarded later in the process, resulting in wasted time, money and effort.

Prior to the reinvention approach, the formal NEPA environmental process was started after the project was in the design stage, and after the project's scope and budget had been set, and legislative commitments had been made on a preferred alternative. With support from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), a team of federal and state agencies has proposed a revised process that would begin the formal NEPA process earlier, during the planning stage of potential future projects. The other major change is getting commitments from dedicated permitting and regulatory agencies to assist in the early planning stages required by NEPA.

By “moving NEPA back to the planning stage,” WSDOT will better meet the intent of NEPA, which is to consider environmental impacts of projects in the planning stages to allow for improved project design with decreased impacts. The new process as defined allows resource and regulatory agencies to be involved in the decision making steps of NEPA, and we have defined formal “concurrence” steps that commit each agency to approval of the steps in NEPA, or to non-concur based on our agencies regulatory authority. In cases of non-concurrence it allows major environmental issues to be addressed up-front rather than in the permit stages of the project when it is more expensive to re-design project elements.

Major changes with the new process:

- **NEPA included in Planning:** The revised process would begin the NEPA process at the planning stage, and end it at some point during design. Too often, work done during planning is ignored or redone when a project reaches the design stage.
- **Interdisciplinary Project Management Team:** The revised process has an interdisciplinary team that includes members from planning, traffic, environmental and project development functions.
- **Agency Input:** Permitting agencies have agreed to be part of the planning process, signing off on specific decision points to allow for “decisions that stick” rather than reconsidering issues at different stages of the process.
- **Decision Steps:** The following decision steps are approved by the agencies or the project planning stops until resolution can be completed. Each agency with permitting jurisdiction over the projects must agree to the following critical steps, and once approved, can not go back and request document revisions on these particular issues:
  1. Purpose and Need
  2. Screening Criteria and Data Needed for Review of Alternatives
  3. Alternatives to Review In the EIS
  4. Preferred Alternative
- **Improved NEPA Documents:** With agency and local government involvement, the major environmental concerns are identified earlier in the process, and better avoidance and minimization will result. This should assure faster permits in the end, since the agencies have been involved throughout. The Corps of Engineers, and Ecology will use the final EISs that are completed as our decision documents for permits. In the past, we often had to create our own EISs to meet our permitting requirements.
- **Better Public Input:** The public is involved through the steering committees and in scoping and public outreach efforts. In the past, the public would be heavily involved in the planning process, then when the EIS was prepared and changes were made to meet environmental requirements, it appeared to the...
frustrated public that the planning process was being done twice. By combining these efforts, we are getting better public support of the process.

Three pilot projects are being tested with the new process. Many other DOT projects are also following the revised way to do NEPA, and better coordination has resulted. The agencies are committed to the success of the process, and dedicated staff has been assigned to each project. Better planning is resulting.