

The Collaborative Decision Making Framework

Having the right people at the table at the right time with the right information

Involvement in a transportation project can be frustrating; whether you are a decision maker, a practitioner, or a stakeholder. It's not uncommon to hit a snag that brings everything to a screeching halt (or at least a crawl) or the project seems to be caught in endless re-do loops. Schedules are missed, the project loses time and money, and it may not be obvious how to get things back on track.

Perhaps any one of these has happened in your experience:

Scenario #1: Inadequate coordination between project planners, resource agencies, and NEPA practitioners meant that some plans weren't considered or the project had to be re-examined.

Scenario #2: A project took way too long to complete, for whatever reason. Funding dried up along the way, or by the time the project came online it was obsolete.

Scenario #3: Community groups or other stakeholders felt they did not have adequate opportunity to participate. Then they threw up roadblocks when it came time to develop or even build the project.

One answer to these issues and many others lies in systematically institutionalizing collaborative decision making into the transportation process. It is absolutely essential to have the right people at the table at the right time with the right information to make good choices that will stand up to financial and environmental scrutiny. The **Collaborative Decision Making Framework (CDMF)** has been developed to specifically meet this goal by providing the necessary support for a truly collaborative process.

What is the CDMF?

The CDMF is based on a structure of key decision points (KDPs) that support the transportation decision making process. The KDPs are milestones—each one either legally mandated or simply common practice—that begin early in the planning process and continue all the way through permitting and contract letting. The CDMF will guide users through a series of steps to help them identify the relevant KDPs to meet their needs. To get the most from the CDMF, users do not have to be at the start of their projects. Instead, users can access the tool through several avenues to do such things as look up best practices, find ways to overcome particular challenges to transportation projects, determine decision making roles and relationships, research special topics, and diagnose process and relationship gaps. ***The CDMF is designed to be used at any time by anyone involved in the transportation decision making process.***

How does it apply to the real world?

The CDMF was built on the real-world experiences:

- **Case Studies.** Development of the CDMF began with a study of best practices of highly collaborative long-range plans, corridors, and projects across the United States. Ultimately, 23 case studies informed the CDMF, providing highly detailed data about decisions made, actions taken, and people involved at each KDP.

- **Workshops.** The CDMF was also shaped through a series of week-long workshops over the course of a year. Transportation professionals from FHWA, state transportation departments, metropolitan planning organizations, resource agencies, and other stakeholders from across the country worked together to create a best practice structure for collaborative decision making that can work across all phases of the transportation process. These workshops focused on individual aspects of the CDMF such as roles and relationships, selection of the preferred solution, and integrating other community planning processes.

The CDMF provides access to the case studies as well as key information from the workshops at each KDP.

How was it designed?

The design of the CDMF began with the data drawn from the case studies and an initial KDP structure to provide a baseline understanding of the transportation decision making process. Project workshops were then used to actively detail and refine the framework through interface with knowledgeable industry professionals. The design has been guided by a set of established goals and is consistent with principles of context sensitive solutions (CSS) and project management. The design goals established for the CDMF are:

Establish a collaborative decision making approach which identifies participant roles and responsibilities at each key decision point and includes:

- Early and on-going involvement of formal decision makers and individuals who have the potential to significantly impact the timely and cost effective delivery of transportation improvements
- A tiered decision making approach to capacity improvements which encourages binding decisions at the earliest possible point

Encourage timely and cost effective project delivery through a process which:

- Ensures transfer of information and decisions between phases
- Encourages early and comprehensive agreement on data sources, level of detail, evaluation criteria and performance measures
- Establishes a comprehensive and proactive risk management strategy

Encourage a decision making approach which evaluates transportation needs within broader community and natural contexts and integrates land planning and development policy, capital improvement planning, protection and enhancement of the human and natural environment, and addresses sustainability issues to the greatest extent possible in order to support community vision and goals.

Encourage consideration of a wide range of options to address capacity problems during the planning phase of decision making as well as early and on-going incorporation of operational elements as a part of the overall decision making approach.

Establish a decision making approach based on fulfilling the intent of legal and regulatory requirements while providing implementation flexibility and adaptability consistent with the design goals.

A description of the six project workshops is attached.

How does it work?

Initially the CDMF will be presented graphically and in report format, providing detailed information on how to implement and sequence each step to ensure that the appropriate partners, data, analyses, tools, and techniques are in place for effective collaborative decision-making. Over the next several months a web-based application will be developed that allows easier access to the CDMF and the growing amount of supporting data. The web tool will also allow the user to identify challenges or barriers in their process as well as conduct a gap analysis to more specifically target their issues with collaboration. The attached graphic representation of the CDMF provides an illustration of how the information is currently sorted and stored for access by practitioners. Although this graphic will change as the web tool is developed, the identified key decision points will remain the same.

At each KDP the user will be able to access information concerning:

- The purpose of the decision,
- Expected outcome(s) of the decision,
- Role that each formal decision maker should play,
- Relationships with stakeholders that support the process,
- Questions that decision makers should consider at that KDP,
- Other plans that should be integrated at that KDP...*and much more.*

CDMF and the Future

The design of the CDMF is essentially complete. Remaining activities include completion of reports that illustrate how the CDMF may be used for project streamlining, linking planning and NEPA, and other relevant industry topics. During 2009 the project will focus on the development of the web application that supports full use of the tool. The web tool will be demonstrated in various conferences and meetings during the year and launched officially in January 2010. Later in 2010 pilot tests will begin to fully test the framework in a local setting with existing needs and challenges.

Over the coming years the CDMF will expand to incorporate current and future research efforts on topics such as community visioning, freight mobility, and greenhouse gas emissions. These topics and many others will continue to add to the case study database supporting collaboration as well as further KDP-level information to support the transportation decision making process.

For additional information on the CDMF and related project integration, please visit the Transportation Research Board SHRP 2 Capacity Program website at http://www.trb.org/shrp2/SHRP2_Capacity.asp