LACKAWANNA VALLEY INDUSTRIAL HIGHWAY PROJECT

An Example of Accelerated Coordination and Cooperative Project Development

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Standard Agency Coordination Meetings (ACMs) are usually sufficient to provide routine projects with needed levels of agency involvement. However, extra coordination may be needed to expedite the development of especially complex or high-priority projects. The challenge is to meet an aggressive schedule without taking short cuts on the methodical development of alternatives and the thorough evaluation of environmental impacts.

One project that was recently accelerated by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) using this process is the Lackawanna Valley Industrial Highway. Located in the coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania, the highway was proposed to connect I-81, near Scranton, with Carbondale located 16 miles to the northeast. The new expressway would reduce congestion on U.S. Route 6, which currently serves the valley. At the same time it would provide good access to large tracts of previously strip-mined land, opening the Lackawanna Valley to new development.

The project had been initiated in 1985, but little progress had been made toward approval. Determined to start construction on the project by 1994, PennDOT established an accelerated coordination process for the project in 1991. The goal of the accelerated process was to complete every step in the developing 10-step process, but to do so rapidly.

The Secretary of Transportation established an Executive Committee of senior Department managers, resource and regulatory agency representatives, and local officials. This group met quarterly to discuss and resolve administrative issues at a senior level. In addition, staff level agency representatives agreed to set aside one full day each month to discuss issues on the project. The Secretary also appointed a special assistant to work with the EIS management team of U.S. DOT staff and consultants. Meetings were held weekly to monitor progress and resolve issues. This organization and the special ACMs provided the opportunity for extensive levels of coordination.

Because some work had already been done, the first group had to back up slightly to make sure that each of the 10 steps was adequately addressed. After formally confirming the consensus on needs (after Step 3) and obtaining consensus on alternatives for detailed study (after Step 4), the management team began an intense level of effort. Teams of engineers and environmental specialists combed the hillsides along alignments selected for detailed study. Global Position System equipment was used to minimize detailed field surveys. More than 400 individual wetlands, most of them very small, were identified and mapped. Geotechnical features, potential waste sites, historic sites, archaeological features, habitat areas, streams, and other sensitive features were included in the data gathering. All this information was entered into the Computer Aided Design (CAD) system being used by engineers to develop the designs. With constraints plotted, engineers tried to develop alignment shifts that would avoid significant resources. This interactive process was used to develop the design for each of the alternatives.

The 16-mile project corridor was divided into four study sections to more effectively present the designs to agencies and the public. Each month at the special ACM, one section was discussed in detail. This approach allowed the field and design work to proceed concurrently, while agencies and the public provided input on other study sections.

Thirteen months after the Secretary of Transportation made this project a priority and "fast tracked" the work, a Record of Decision (ROD) was issued by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Approximately one month after the ROD was obtained, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACOE) issued the Section 404 permit in accordance with the Integrated NEPA/404 process developed by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, USACOE, FHWA, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Marine Fisheries. Because of the level of cooperation with resource agencies, PennDOT, FHWA, and local officials, many design refinements and special mitigation commitments were made:

- A methodology for evaluating secondary impacts was developed and carried out;
- Twelve municipalities were encouraged to update their comprehensive plans and zoning to accommodate new development (this work has now begun);
- Coordination with the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources enabled designers to weave the selected alignment between a smoldering coal waste pile and a sensitive wetland complex;
- Historic and archaeological surveys identified remnants of a coal mining "patch" town that was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. This area was avoided entirely;
- The 16-mile project affects fewer than six acres of wetlands.

Initial sections of the Lackawanna Valley Industrial Highway Project (LVIH) will be under construction in early 1994, with all construction sections under way by November 1994. The success of LVIH arose from a high degree of coordination and cooperation and the high level commitment of all agencies involved.

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resolution techniques to settle such disputes. Otherwise, if every effort has been made to achieve consensus, the project may advance to the next task.

The key concepts behind PennDOT's coordination efforts are described as follows.

Compromise on Environmental Issues

The ACM has facilitated relations among the agencies themselves. Rather than focusing solely on their areas of jurisdiction or special expertise, the agencies receive a broader view of all the environmental resources affected by each project. With a better understanding of a project's overall impacts, the agencies are more willing to balance their individual concerns for specific resources with the minimization of project impacts throughout the study area.

Emphasis on Active Agency and Public Participation

The monthly agency meetings have shifted the focus of agency coordination from impersonal "review and critique" to interactive "discussion and consensus." Rather than commenting on reports, agencies view presentations that offer a more sophisticated visualization of existing conditions and environmental impacts. The discussion periods following these presentations facilitate the exchange of information and encourage more creative problem-solving techniques. Sometimes this means that agency representatives will work alongside project teams on studies that lie within their areas of expertise. Likewise, members of the public through separate meetings are invited to be active partners in project development. PennDOT has found that loosely structured formats that promote one-to-one discussion maximize participation at plans displays and public meetings.

Visualization of Technical Information

PennDOT makes every effort to adapt presentations to the level of knowledge of its audience. Using the latest visualization techniques, project teams package complex data in a format that is more easily understood by agency personnel and public meeting participants, who typically have little or no background in engineering. Displays incorporate charts, graphs, color-enhanced maps, aerial photography, three-dimensional renderings, and videos. Newsletters, brochures, and handouts use simple, direct language and avoid jargon.

Close Coordination of Agency and Public Involvement

Agencies and the public sometimes have varying interests and conflicting agendas. For example, although agencies may support an alternative that avoids wetlands, citizens may oppose the alternative because it displaces homes or businesses. PennDOT's 10-step process is structured so that the project team can effectively facilitate discussion and resolution of such conflicts. Typically, a public meeting is held within a few weeks after an ACM presentation so that residents of the study area can be informed of the agencies' latest input. Agency representatives are often invited to attend public meetings so that they can communicate directly with interested citizens. Open dialogue enables the department to best balance agency goals for environmental mitigation with community needs and concerns.

PennDOT's Transportation Project Development Process is not only environmentally responsible, it is also responsive to public needs. Ongoing consultation with the agencies ensures total compliance with NEPA and other environmental laws and regulations. However, PennDOT's approach reaches beyond mere adherence to the letter of the law. The spirit of cooperation engenders more innovative solutions to today's transportation problems—solutions that incorporate advanced techniques for minimizing environmental impacts. It encourages the citizens of Pennsylvania to take part in developing the transportation improvements that will best serve their communities. By streamlining the EIS and permit-preparation processes, PennDOT has improved efficiency, enabling project teams to complete more improvements on time and within budget. While providing uniform procedures for standard projects, the Transportation Project Development Process has the flexibility to accommodate the unique needs of initiatives that do not readily fit into the typical pattern of ongoing Department programming (see box for related article on the Lackawanna Valley Industrial Highway).

References

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