Simplification of Federal-Aid Procedures: The Everett Bypass Experience

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One of the biggest problems in government is the burden of regulations and procedures, unnecessary paperwork, and seemingly endless reviews that local, state, and federal agencies must endure in order to get funds authorized and projects built. Everyone believes projects could proceed faster with real dollar savings if the red tape could be cut, but how to do the cutting is the problem. The $25 million Everett Bypass demonstration project, which the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) took from inception to completion in just 3½ years, may provide some of the answers. It is impossible to say exactly what the cost of the project would have been had it taken 10 years to finish, as originally expected, but it is roughly estimated that an additional $11 million would have been needed due to inflation alone.

The Project

Section 141 of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1976 authorized the U.S. Secretary of Transportation to carry out a project demonstrating the feasibility of reducing the time needed to complete a highway project. On December 1, 1976, the US-30 bypass project in Everett, Pennsylvania, was selected to fulfill the congressional mandate. The bypass was planned to relieve the heavy traffic Everett was experiencing because of the new Raystown Dam Lake 30 miles north of the town. Constructed first was a 2.9-mile bypass for US-30 east of town to Traffic Route 26 to the north. This section was opened to traffic on August 24, 1979—just 32 months after project inception—and allowed many Raystown Recreational Complex users to avoid the downtown Everett bottleneck. The second construction contract completed the project. On August 2, 1980, the entire 4.6-mile project was fully opened to traffic. Only 3 years and 7 months had been required—6 years less than the average for a project of this size and type in Pennsylvania.

The project was an opportunity many highway officials have dreamed of—to attack, dissect, and simplify the massive administrative process that normally takes so much time on a large project. Time savings were most significant in the area of communications. For instance, early coordination of priorities and procedures allowed identification and elimination of time-consuming federal and state procedures without going outside statutory requirements. Project coordinators were then designated and extensive use was made of concurrent interagency reviews with decision makers on hand. Getting these people together avoided most misunderstandings. "Milestone" meetings were held on a scheduled basis at major development points, such as design approval, to keep high-level management and coordinators up-to-date on the project timetable that had been established by using the critical path method (CPM) technique. The CPM schedule was not just a wish list of dates. It was a realistic and useful tool that kept people in all areas totally involved and updated.

During the environmental phase, major time savers included minimizing top-level U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) reviews of the final environmental impact statement (EIS) and the use of concurrently prepared technical reports to complement a concise EIS. Although the Everett Bypass was not a large urban project and was not highly controversial, lack of sensitivity to the public's concerns could have created significant public opposition. Selection of another studied alignment or the inclusion of the Route 26 Spur into downtown Everett could have triggered overwhelming opposition to the project. The extensive efforts made to educate the public on the specifics of the project minimized problems. This innovative community involvement allowed an early design commitment, preliminary right-of-way activity, and significant time savings.

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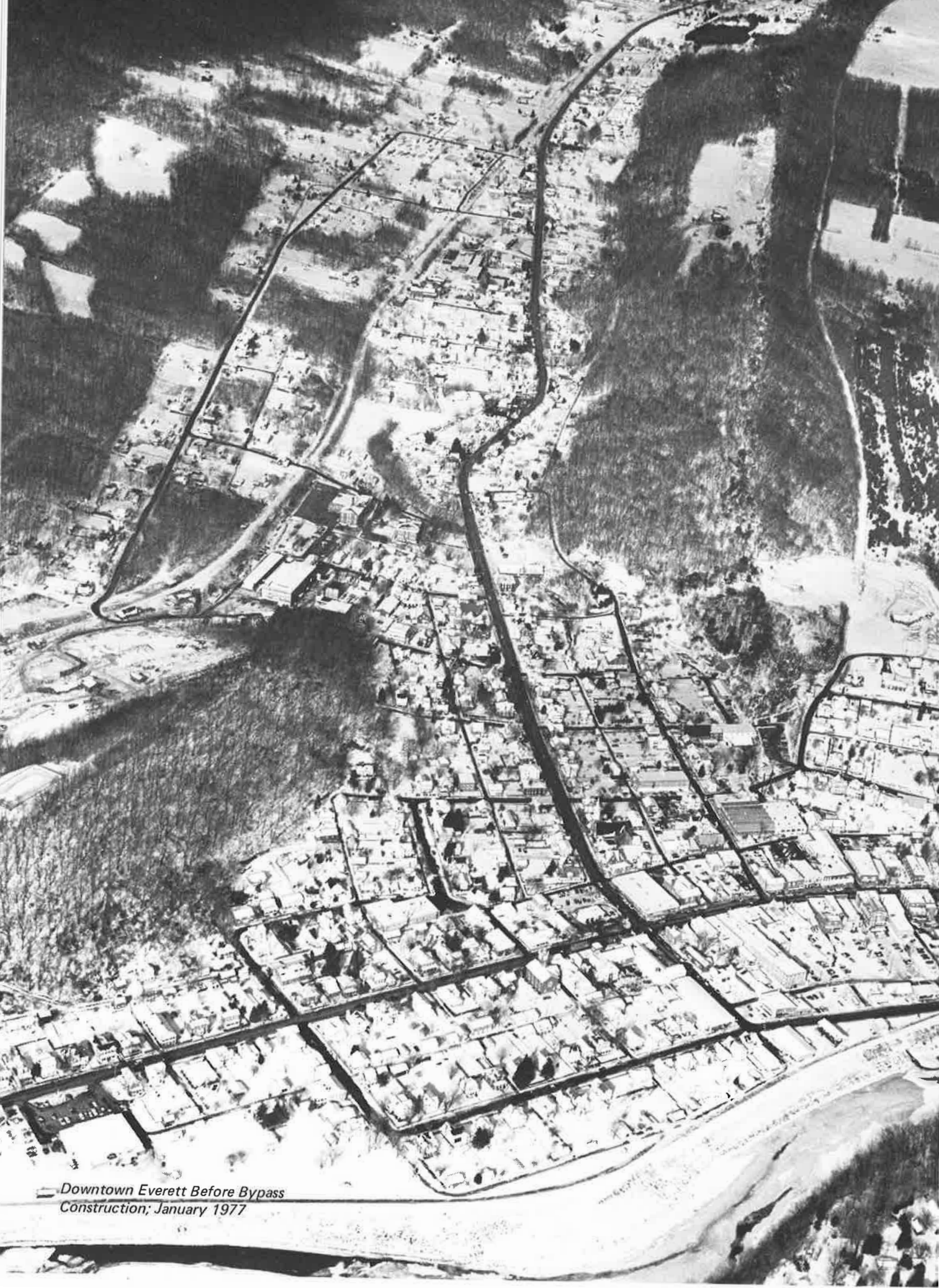
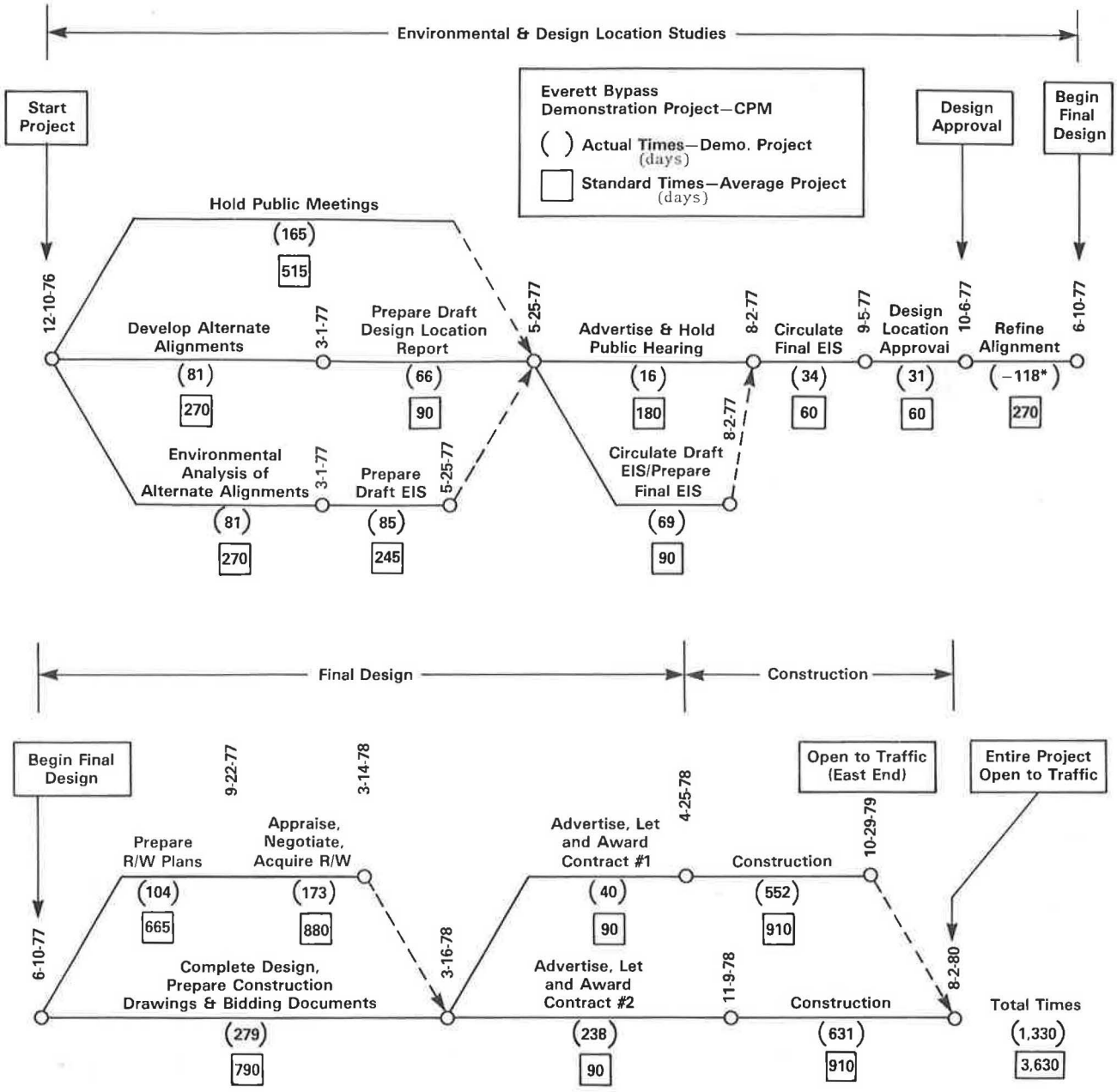


Downtown Everett Before Bypass Construction; January 1977



*Reflects Telescoping of Activities

Design was expedited by starting final design simultaneously with the circulation of the draft EIS and maintaining close liaison among federal, state, local, and private concerns. One method of making sure design was not unnecessarily delayed was in the area of photogrammetry. Aerial photos of all feasible corridors were taken shortly after the location phase began but expensive mapping was not done until the preferred alternate location was selected. Early design of line and grade allowed preliminary right-of-way activities to be advanced. For instance, while a right-of-way plan was being prepared, selected negotiations were under way. Imaginative use of last-resort housing cleared the right-of-way and relocated residents expeditiously, and a special study of the most difficult acquisition resulted in early settlement and improved handling of a potentially disruptive taking that involved the area's largest employer, the Everett Hardwood Lumber Company. Concurrent design and right-of-way activities permitted the final design to accommodate special features such as noise berms that had been included in negotiations by right-of-way personnel.

CPM deadlines for public meetings and hearings were met. The project coordinators briefed higher-level management at major project milestones (e.g., location approval and design approval). This provided a forum for decisions on policy questions and on implications of alternative courses of action.

In addition to those already mentioned, there are several other activities where management's support of exceptions to normal procedure can save time:

1. Prepare technical reports to complement a concise EIS.
2. Investigate availability of critical materials early in project development.
3. Identify sensitive acquisitions during the environmental study phase.
4. Provide the preliminary alignment plan to right-of-way personnel soon after identification of the preferred alternative.
5. Prepare and review the relocation plan and preacquisition study concurrently with preparation of final plans.
6. Use last-resort housing more imaginatively and expeditiously to clear the right-of-way and relocate residents.
7. Make after-value appraisals as design plans are being finalized, thus allowing offers to be made immediately on project authorization.
8. A caseworker approach to negotiations and relocation assistance can accelerate the right-of-way process.
9. Specify the open-to-traffic date as being earlier than the project completion date.
10. Compress time between letting and award into less than one week.
11. Use end-result specifications and lump-sum payments for selected bid items.

Implementation

FHWA is now identifying ways that states may take full advantage of the findings of the accelerated demonstration project at Everett. Procedures and policies are being reviewed at all levels to determine which can and should be implemented.

However, there is a limit to the number of projects that can be designated as "priority". If an agency designates too many projects for special treatment, they become routine, personnel are spread too thin, and there is no advantage over normal processing. Some states may only have staffing available for one or two priority projects. Other states may be able to really concentrate on six or more. The essential thing is for highway organizations to recognize their personnel limitations and capabilities and to restrict priority projects to a workable number.

A screening process is important. It would not be wise to try to accelerate a project that is totally bogged down in controversy. A project that has strong public support is an ideal candidate for accelerated methods. There are a number of obvious candidate projects that could receive priority treatment. Delays on some 48 EIS's on Interstate-gap projects will, if something is not accelerated soon, push them past the deadline (October 30, 1983) for Interstate funding. There are critical bridges, access needs, bypasses, and other projects that have sufficient importance to warrant the special attention and extra effort necessary to have them completed on an expedited schedule.

PennDOT demonstrated through its efforts with the Everett Bypass Project that highway people are not just engineers and specialists. They are managers, and there is real potential in extra management effort on highway projects. We have been through a 70-year learning curve in highway management; but, in the past 15 years, we have, in some respects, overreacted to the possibilities of legal ramifications and adverse public sentiment. We have taken many of the risks out of highway management by our regulations, procedures, policies, and normal processes that cause us to take one step at a time, follow the flow chart, and make sure every "i" is dotted and "t" is crossed before going to the next step. For projects that generate little controversy and are high priority, the public cannot afford the time and money necessary to remove risks that are not there. Highway managers must be willing to make that kind of decision.

FHWA is doing several things to simplify procedures. The entire agency is going through a priority review of selected DOT regulations. A memorandum (February 25, 1981) from Lamm to FHWA's operating offices opens the door for suggestions, reviews, and changes to policy and procedures that will simplify, expedite, and save money without sacrificing interdisciplinary needs. The concept of certification acceptance is being expanded not only in terms of the number of states involved but also by efforts to include more procedures where certification can be allowed. Also, a pilot workshop that uses brainstorming techniques is planned to allow federal and state officials to offer suggestions regarding specific procedures that should be simplified.

The Everett Bypass experience, however, is not the answer to all problems. Existing personnel ceilings preclude the routine application of all the techniques used at Everett, and not every project is so well accepted by the elements of a community. The project did demonstrate, nonetheless, that interested people, working in harmony with a common goal and within the flexibility that already exists in statutes, regulations, and guidelines, can achieve dramatic results.

Completed project looking northward, November 1980.