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Annual Report July 1, 2005 through June 30, 2006

Background

The quality of life for the citizens of North Carolina, both urban and rural, is heavily dependent on transportation. Highways provide the overwhelming proportion of that transportation. Our transportation system also provides our country with an advantage in the world marketplace, as the transportation cost in the US, compared to gross domestic product, is lower than most countries. Again, highways move the major share of commodities within this country. There is consensus among the Interagency Leadership Team that the transportation system should be planned hand-in-hand with economic development and the protection and enhancement of our State's cultural and natural resources. These resources are also extremely important to the quality of life in North Carolina.

Various stakeholders at the national and State level are concerned with highway project development issues and timing. The public process that this country enjoys often leads to issues that can become polarized and lead to indecision or lengthy studies in the project delivery process. Our State is growing in population, jobs, leisure activities, and travel demand. Our State must increase transportation system capacity through expanded transit, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, better operations of the current highway system, and expansion of highways. But mobility must be accomplished in a manner which is compatible with and enhances the natural and human environment.

The leaders in the following group represent agencies that are integrally involved in the planning, development, and implementation of North Carolina's highway and transportation system.

- North Carolina Department of Transportation
- North Carolina Department of the Environment and Natural Resources
- North Carolina Department of Commerce
- North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources
- North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission
- United States Army Corps of Engineers – Wilmington District
- United States Department of Commerce - National Marine Fisheries Service
- United States Department of Transportation -- Federal Highway Administration
- United States Environmental Protection Agency
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service

This group came together because it believes that it is essential, and possible, to develop future transportation projects in a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach that involves all stakeholders and preserves the scenic, historic, natural environment, and community values setting while efficiently meeting the mobility, economic, and safety needs of our citizens.

Mission

The mission of the Interagency Leadership Team is to develop and implement an interagency leadership plan for North Carolina to balance successfully mobility, natural and cultural resource protection, community values, and economic vitality at the confluence of our missions.

Goals

The Interagency Leadership Team has identified the top concerns and issues facing transportation, the environment and the economy in North Carolina. The Interagency Leadership Team has three goals:

Goal 1 - Develop a shared, comprehensive GIS database

Geographic information systems (GIS) is a decision support tool for balancing the needs of transportation planning while enhancing the natural and human environment and economic development potential in North Carolina. The strength of GIS lies in its ability to combine many types of data onto a digital map and then analyze that information in an efficient manner. The GIS data necessary for decision making in the transportation planning realm is either out of date or does not exist at all statewide. This situation is a result of a lack of financial and human resources at the local, state, and federal government levels to create and maintain this key GIS information that is instrumental for good decision making.

Goal 2 - Local land use and long-range transportation planning result in projects that meet mobility, economic, and environmental goals.

Local land use planning can be used to achieve shared economic development and environmental goals when land use plans, transportation plans, and environmental stewardship objectives are integrated and compatible. Generally, land use and transportation planning have not been consistently integrated at the local government level. The result is often that federal, state, and local mandates meet at cross purposes – for example, requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act are not being met through state and local planning processes. The public is demanding greater transparency and more involvement in state and federal agency decision processes. Government agencies at all levels are responding by building better tools, providing technical assistance, and creating cross-disciplinary relationships to accommodate expanded citizen involvement. Recognizing this, state and federal government agencies can take a leadership role in integrating land use planning and long-range mobility planning by (1) enhancing the compatibility of

land use, economic development, transportation planning, and environmental stewardship; (2) enhancing land use planning to achieve shared economic development and environmental goals; and (3) considering impacts, including secondary and cumulative impacts, starting at the long-range Comprehensive Transportation Planning process.

Goal 3 - Improve the Merger 01 process

In response to problems with meeting let schedules for state transportation projects, the NC Department of Transportation, the NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources, and the US Army Corps of Engineers created a method for integrating environmental permit review and mitigation processes for transportation projects. Known formally as the Section 404/NEPA Interagency Merger Process, the name was shorted to the Merger 01 Process, reflecting its establishment in 2001. The Merger 01 process was created to accomplish two objectives: (1) to develop quality permit applications and issue environmental permits that support the timely delivery of the transportation program while minimizing disruption to the natural and human environment; and (2) to improve the work-flow effectiveness and efficiency of permit application development, coordination and issuance process.

The Merger 01 Process is an exemplary program, recognized nationally as an innovative approach to state and federal cooperation in transportation improvement and environmental protection. However, work still needs to be done to realize the promises that such cooperation can deliver. Although teams and work groups have been established under the FHWA/DOT work plan, and appropriate technologies and information exist for training teams and work groups, the Merger 01 process has not received formal approval by all federal and state partners. Moreover, a limited number of agency staff devoted to Merger 01 and lack of prioritization in staff effort have hampered progress of the program. In addition to managerial direction and resources, a staff training plan in Merger 01 processes and procedures and a common language with basic definitions need to be developed and delivered.

Key Accomplishments

Over the past state fiscal year (July 1, 2005 through June 30, 2006), the Interagency Leadership Team has accomplished several milestones:

- Completed the development of the Interagency Leadership Team Strategic Plan
- Developed a brochure for the use in educating people about the Interagency Leadership Team's mission, goals, and benefits
- Launched a website (www.ncilt.org) that includes information about the Interagency Leadership Team, their mission and goals
- Shared information about the Interagency Leadership Team and its goals to:
 - NC Economic Development Board
 - NC Board of Transportation

- Secretaries of the NC Department of Commerce, NC Department of Cultural Resources, NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources and NC Department of Transportation
- Sustainable Sandhills
- US Environmental Protection Agency
- US Department of Transportation ,Federal Highway Administration Office of Planning, Environment and Realty
- Resource agency, NCDOT and FHWA staff involved in the Merger 01 process

The following summarizes progress made toward each one of the Interagency Leadership Team's goals:

Goal 1 - Develop a comprehensive shared GIS database

- Created a business case for the development and maintenance of a comprehensive shared GIS database.
- Presented the results of the business case to Secretaries of the NC Department of Commerce, NC Department of Cultural Resources, NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources and NC Department of Transportation for feedback and endorsement
- Provided the business case to the Governor's Office and the North Carolina Office of State Budget

Goal 2- Local land use and long-range transportation planning

- Met with officials from Brunswick County and agreed to pilot the Comprehensive Transportation Planning Process through joint actions which encourage comprehensive planning in this rapidly developing county
- Continued the development and implementation of the Comprehensive Transportation Planning Process and its integration with the Project Development Process

Goal 3 - Improve the Merger 01 Process

- Developed agency Roles and Responsibilities Guidance for the multi-agency transportation and environmental decision-making process (Merger 01)
- Refined the Conflict Resolution Process used for the multi-agency transportation and environmental decision-making process (Merger 01)
- Began the development of curriculum for Merger 01 training
- Re-initiated discussions concerning High Quality Resources

Future

The team will continue to meet to ensure that the strategies agreed upon are being implemented by the different work groups and that the strategies are generating the desired goals. The team will also address new areas for improvement and avenues to discuss policies, regulations and laws that affect the agencies. The team will keep track of new initiatives started at the different agencies that may impact the other members or duplicate efforts already underway at the statewide level.

