# Guidance for Using and Developing the Community Understanding Report During a Comprehensive Transportation Plan Study

The purpose of the Community Understanding Report (CUR) is to provide key information about the features of a planning area relevant for a Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) study and future development of transportation proposals. RPO/MPO staff, the NCDOT Transportation Planning Division (TPD) Project Engineer and the CTP Steering Committee members utilize the CUR information for various purposes during a CTP study. Prior to the start of the CTP, the CUR information can help in the identification of stakeholders and inform the selection of the CTP Steering Committee members. The CUR can also help in the development of a public involvement plan and planning public outreach during the CTP process.

During the CTP development the CUR information can be used to help inform the development of the vision, goals, and objectives. The CUR can help provide and confirm data used for the base year and the future growth projections and model development (if a model is part of a CTP study). Information from the CUR can be used to identify and evaluate constraints and priorities to be considered in the development and analysis for potential CTP alternatives/ solutions. Information within the CUR can help with the identification of the need for project proposals and be added to final documentation for appropriate project recommendations.

**Note:** There are on-going efforts to incorporate the CUR in the NEPA/SEPA process. The integration process of how these two will interact is currently being worked out.

**Note for MPOs:**
This guidance describes development and use of the CUR in CTPs in non-MPO areas. However, the CUR template may also be used in development of CTPs or MTPs in MPO areas. For use in MPO areas, the CUR development would also occur early in the planning process, would need to be incorporated into roles/ responsibilities developed for the plan, and the data from the CUR could be used throughout the development of the plan and for subsequent phases of project development after long range planning.

**Action Steps to Develop Community Understanding Report**

1. Prior to the start of the CTP Study, the TPD Project Engineer should let their RPO know about the CUR and include time for its development in the planning work program (PWP).
2. The TPD Group Supervisor should send a start of study letter/email to the RPO about 3 months prior to establishing the CTP Steering Committee – giving a minimum of 2 months to initiate critical portions of the CUR ("initiate" meaning begin answering questions that can easily be answered, but not having the final answer and leaving certain questions as needed to be answered later during the course of the CTP study). In this letter/email to the local RPO/MPO, the TPD Project Engineer should convey the information about the CUR and set up a time to discuss the document.
3. When the TPD Group Supervisor sends the start of study letter to the RPO, they should also send the study initiation letter to the local county/city staff telling them about starting the CTP study. This letter should explain that NCDOT has asked the RPO to collaborate with NCDOT staff on the completion of a CUR.
4. The TPD Project Engineer should call or meet with the RPO/MPO Coordinator to discuss the completion expectations:

   A. If there any questions found to be not relevant to the CTP study area, they should be answered as 'Not Applicable'.

   B. The intent is that the RPO/MPO staff will initially assess the question for relevance to the CTP and to collect readily available data to answer the questions. After the initial effort, RPO/MPO staff will collaborate with TPD staff to determine responsibilities and timeframe for the completion of the CUR.

   C. RPO/MPO staff, in collaboration with TPD staff, discuss the best means to address gaps in the available data. **Local government staff and other subject-matter experts should be enlisted to help answer appropriate questions.** Additional participants can be engaged in the completion of the CUR based on need and availability. There may be some questions in the CUR that will be answered best by the CTP Steering Committee at a later date.

5. TPD Project Engineer should provide the GIS layers they have clipped for the CTP development within 4 weeks of the date of the letter/email to the local RPO/MPO Coordinator discussing the CUR. (The TPD Project Engineer needs to ask if the local area prefers the geodatabase format used by TPD for CTPs or would like shapefiles). The TPD Project Engineer should also send the socioeconomic (SE) data they have collected for the CTP (population and employment data) and model if there is a model being developed for the CTP.

**Overview of the CUR Start of Study Process:**

1. RPO/MPO staff reviews CUR to assess which questions are relevant and which data is readily accessible to address these questions. TPD staff provides clipped data layers to RPO/MPO staff.

2. RPO/MPO staff, in collaboration with TPD staff, discuss the best means to address gaps in the available data.* This could be an on-site meeting or phone call.

3. RPO/MPO staff and TPD staff agree to responsibilities and timelines for completing the CUR.

*Approaches to obtain missing data could include:

   a. A workshop or meeting with appropriate individuals, including potential CTP Steering Committee members
   b. Local RPO/MPO Coordinator sends out the remaining questions to appropriate subject matter experts

**Tips for CUR Development**

- Communication is key. There is no substitute for communication between the team members. Early, frequent, and clear communication is a key to success.
- The RPO/MPO staff should try and answer the questions identified as appropriate for the CTP study and it should not be a burden.
- There may be some questions in the CUR that will be answered best by the CTP Steering Committee at a later date. These questions should be tracked in some way, so they can be answered at the appropriate times and documented. The responsibility for tracking and documenting should be negotiated between TPD staff, RPO/MPO staff, and the steering committee if one has been formed. These questions can help steer the discussions of CTP meetings.
- Available resources should be used to quickly answer the questions. There is no need to “create” information. Qualitative data can be as useful as quantitative data and is better than no information. Reference documents can be attached or referenced. “Not Applicable” or “N/A” may also be an appropriate response.
- If a question cannot be answered exactly for a particular study area, but there is similar or related information to be provided, the RPO/ MPO staff should feel free to explain the difference and any assumptions in the response they are providing. (i.e “Where are farmlands and timberlands located in the study area?” The response may start, “Farmlands and timberlands were not mapped, but following are the routes that are most impacted by farming or truck traffic:”).
- Be sure to reference and use information from the CUR throughout the CTP process, including at CTP Steering Committee meetings.
- The filling out of the CUR is not part of the CTP schedule but is initiated prior to the start of the official CTP study (prior to the 1st CTP meeting). One approach may be to collect all the data possible prior to the initial meetings, then have a workshop day or meeting with the local experts to work on relevant information with them, and then send out remaining questions to other subject matter experts

**Documentation/Directions**

NCDOT TPD Project Engineer will provide GIS data layers/maps found in the NCDOT CTP GIS data layers spreadsheet for the RPO/MPO staff at t the beginning of the CUR so RPO/MPO Staff do not have to develop these maps. These layers/maps are highlighted in the accompanying CUR questionnaire. A list of the GIS data layers being provided should also be supplied with the files.

- In the accompanying CUR questionnaire, you will notice there are boxes that list the primary source(s) for obtaining the data, labeled 'Data Source(s)', and other possible resources, labeled 'Other Source(s)'. This information is provided to assist you in gathering the information. ***For documentation please modify these tables to reflect the actual source(s) of the data used***. Documentation of the data source will be helpful when the data is referenced by others as projects move through the project development process.

- Questions in the CUR can be addressed using maps, tables, narratives or some combination of the three. The goal is to provide something that is informative and not something that is a final product

- If you feel the question is best answered in a GIS map format please label the map to correlate with the question in the CUR, and supplement the data by a brief narrative summary if the map is not self-explanatory.

- Any mapping should preferably be at Block Group level unless the tract level better fits the needs. Some data comparisons are only possible at the county level (see 'Notes' below).

- Data that is not supported by quantitative data sets but is gathered qualitatively through interviews or similar method(s), may be mapped or depicted using text boxes, "call outs," or other symbols, and displayed using interactive GIS "information" boxes if you want. Marked up maps are also acceptable.

**Notes:**

- *The US Census changed how it collects and collates data for the 2010 Census, including changes to many census geography boundaries. That has made it much more difficult to compare many census geographies to previous census geographies. County boundaries of course remain constant.* ***Document clearly the geography for any data included.***
- *All qualitative data sources are listed in order of priority of likely information or data availability.*