Initial Project Coordination (Scoping)

1. Purpose

This Procedures Manual chapter provides guidance regarding the initial project coordination[1] that should occur for NCDOT projects. It describes various approaches, sources of information, questions to ask, and techniques to implement. The information in this chapter should be used to help the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant understand the framework for initiating project coordination and carrying it through Merger Screening. Upon completion of initial project coordination, the NCDOT Project Manager should be able to identify, define, and describe the proposed project that will be carried forward through the environmental review process.

The process for conducting initial project coordination is adaptable and should be modified to meet specific project needs. Accordingly, this chapter is intended to provide the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant with an understanding of the process and a collection of resources that can be tailored on a project-by-project basis. The following sections provide background information, a description of roles and responsibilities, an explanation of the process and timing, a milestone checklist, and an overview of additional resources. Guidance for ensuring this chapter is up-to-date is also provided.

2. Background

Initial project coordination is the early and open exchange of information that helps to confirm the NEPA/SEPA class of action and determine the range of issues to be considered in an environmental document or supporting environmental documentation. The objectives of initial project coordination include:

- Understanding the problem, including its history and context;
- Defining the project and the limits of what it can cover;
- Exploring the characteristics of the human and natural environment;
- Identifying potential issues and constraints;
- Discussing possible solutions;
- Determining whether the project will advance through the Merger Process;
- Planning the project's approach; and
- Communicating information with the project team.

[1] In the past, NCDOT referred to this as the "scoping process."

Initial project coordination is an ongoing process, not a singular event. It occurs through various types of communications and activities, including meetings, discussions, and email exchanges. At NCDOT, this coordination is typically referred to as **scoping**.

Through **scoping**, the NCDOT Project Manager should be able to identify and communicate a project's purpose; the real issues that have the potential to influence it; and the plan for executing the project's development and design.

Contract Scoping occurs between the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant. The purpose of Contract Scoping is to discuss the project, develop the Consultant's Scope of Services, negotiate a fee, and execute a Notice to Proceed.

The **Merger Process** provides a forum for appropriate agency representatives to discuss and reach consensus on ways to facilitate meeting the regulatory requirements of Section 404 of the Clean Water Act during the NEPA/SEPA decision-making phase of transportation projects. Merger Screening, and the associated Merger Screening decision, should occur prior to External Scoping.

Internal Scoping occurs between the NCDOT Project Manager and project team members (i.e., the Consultant Team, NCDOT technical units, FWHA, MPOs/RPOs, and planners from municipalities). Internal Scoping is intended to orient transportation professionals to the project and, to the extent possible, ensure the project team is in agreement prior to the involvement of regulatory and resource agencies. Internal Scoping helps to inform whether NCDOT chooses to utilize the Merger Process.

External Scoping occurs between the NCDOT Project Manager, their Consultant, and representatives from other regulatory and resource agencies (i.e., USACE, NC DEQ-DWR, NC DEQ-DCM, SHPO, USFWS). External Scoping is intended to introduce the project to regulatory and resource agencies and begin discussions about existing resources and potential permitting needs.

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) *Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA* define **scoping** as "the early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action." For more information on the scoping process for Environmental Impact Statements prepared pursuant to NEPA, see 14 CFR §1501.7 Scoping.

Scoping meetings are strongly encouraged when they are feasible, but they are not required. Face-to-face meetings allow project team members to conduct a detailed review of data and maps. These meetings aid in establishing productive working relationships, and maintaining this open communication should facilitate a smoother project development and permitting process. Under certain circumstances, in-person meetings may not be possible due to schedule constraints, or necessary due to the anticipated level of impacts or project complexity. While not ideal, conference calls and email distributions may be sufficient in these situations. Additional information regarding scoping meetings and the communication of project information is provided in Section 4.

3. Roles and Responsibilities

Multiple parties are involved in initial project coordination, and these stakeholders can provide valuable insight to the NCDOT Project Manager. It is the responsibility of each stakeholder to adequately prepare for and actively participate in initial project coordination. Key parties, and their associated responsibilities, are summarized below.

NCDOT Project Managers and their Consultant have ultimate responsibility for leading initial project coordination. The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant are responsible for reviewing and utilizing available information; preparing for and scheduling meetings; ensuring the involvement of appropriate parties; and incorporating meeting results and outcomes into the remainder of the project development process.

NCDOT Subject Matter Experts from the technical units are responsible for participating in the scoping process and sharing data, recommendations, and relevant experience from their respective areas to help inform the project development process. This participation may include sharing insight on specific issues, attitudes, and trends.

The NCDOT Environmental Policy Unit is available to provide clarification on requirements and guidance on a project-specific basis.

Project Team Members include the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant, NCDOT Subject Matter Experts, FWHA, MPOs/RPOs, and planners from municipalities. It is important to include local stakeholders on the project team to ensure, to the extent possible, that the transportation professionals are in agreement prior to coordinating with the regulatory and resources agencies.

Merger Team Members may include primary signatory agencies (FHWA, USACE, NCDOT, and NC DEQ) and partnering signatory agencies (USEPA, USFWS, NMFS, NC WRC, SHPO, USFS, TVA, NPS, USCG). The composition of the Merger Team will vary on a project-by-project basis depending on factors like the project's location and scope.

4. Process and Timing

Through initial project coordination, the NCDOT Project Manager should be able to understand the problem, including its history and context; define the project and the limits of what it can cover; explore the characteristics of the human and natural environment; identify potential issues and constraints; discuss possible solutions; determine whether the project will advance through the Merger Process; plan the project's approach; and communicate information with the project team.

These objectives can be achieved by various means, and a one-size-fits-all approach is not applicable to this process. Accordingly, this section is focused on describing the content and substance of the information that's needed, not prescribing the process for obtaining it. For step-by-step overview, please review the milestone checklist in Section 6 of this chapter.

Understand the Problem

The focus of this objective is to examine known information and ask questions about the problem (including its origin and context) to fully understand what's causing it. The NCDOT Project Manager should gather the existing information that is relevant to their project and prepare a project area map. A site visit is encouraged to ground-truth GIS data. Data sources to review include:

Prior to beginning any coordination, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should identify key dates, including **Right-of-Way** and **Construction Letting**. The project development process can be complex and challenging. It is critical for the NCDOT Project Manager to be aware of major milestone dates so that an appropriate and reasonable approach can be developed and implemented.

Planning Documents (CTPs, Thoroughfare Plans, Long-Range Transportation Plans, and Corridor Studies)

- Extent of public involvement and level of participation
- Local issues that arose during plan development
- Local land use and development information
- Unique characteristics of the local area
- History of past measures taken to address the transportation problem
- Other current or planned projects in the vicinity of the anticipated study area

Express Design and Project Scoping Report / Feasibility Studies

- Feasible alternatives that were not studied
- Alternatives that were eliminated

ATLAS

- Geospatial screening tool
- Data search tool

As part of the project prioritization and programming process, each project should have a basic problem statement. The problem statement should cover existing transportation facilities and services, the nature of the transportation problem, where it occurs, why it occurs, its severity, and duration. If the problem is not adequately defined or supported by data, the NCDOT Project Manager should coordinate with the project team to identify the types of data that will be needed to characterize and demonstrate the problem. The problem statement helps to inform the development of the **purpose and need**, which is a key tenet of the environmental review.

The **purpose and need** statement describes what is to be accomplished and why it is necessary. It is intended to clarify the expected outcome of a public expenditure and to justify that expenditure.

The **purpose** clearly and succinctly states why the project is being proposed and articulates the anticipated positive outcomes.

The **need** describes the key problem(s) to be addressed and, to the extent possible, explains their underlying causes.

Identifying and leveraging available information is critical to understanding the problem and the project it is to become. Utilizing the data gathered, analyses conducted, and decisions made before the beginning of the project development process will result in a more efficient and effective use of time and resources. In

coordination with the project team, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should examine the existing data and determine its validity and completeness. If additional data may be needed, the NCDOT Project Manager should identify what the data is, why and when it is needed, and how it will be used, and work with the project team to collect it.

Define the Project

The focus of this objective is to clearly establish the proposed project and justify its limits. First, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should determine if the project is included and accurately described in applicable planning documents (i.e., the CTP or the STIP). Next, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should determine if limits have been identified. If limits have been identified, it is important to verify the project has **logical termini** and **independent utility**, and improper **segmentation** has not occurred. If limits have not yet been determined, the NCDOT Project Manager should coordinate with the project team to ensure that independent utility can be demonstrated and the logical termini are justified by the project's purpose and need. The NCDOT Environmental Policy Unit is available to provide guidance on these topics as needed.

Independent utility is defined as whether the project can "stand alone." Assuming no other project is contemplated, a project with independent utility serves a distinct purpose or function.

Logical termini is defined as the rational endpoints for a transportation improvement and the rational endpoints for review of the environmental impacts.

Segmentation can occur when an action is broken down into small parts in order to avoid the appearance of significance of the total action.

In order to fully define the project, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should also confirm the presence or absence of other desired project features, such as bicycle and pedestrian accommodations, -Y-line improvements, or improvements that extend the project limits. If multiple municipalities and/or planning organizations are involved, the NCDOT Project Manager should determine if the project team members are in agreement or if there are varying points of view and levels of support for the project.

Explore the Characteristics of the Human and Natural Environment

As part of the research conducted to understand the problem, the NCDOT Project Manager should have a sense of the overall characteristics of the project's setting and potentially affected resources. Now that the project has been defined, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant can outline the general study area and conduct a preliminary review of the environmental setting.

The **general study area** is the geographic area that may be directly affected by a project. The general study area must contain the proposed project and all potential related ground disturbing activities (i.e., -Y-line improvements). Additionally, the general study area should include room for project modifications (i.e., the addition of a turn lane).

The general study area is not the only or ultimate study area; it is a preliminary identification of an area that may be impacted by the construction of a project. Multiple resource-specific study areas may also

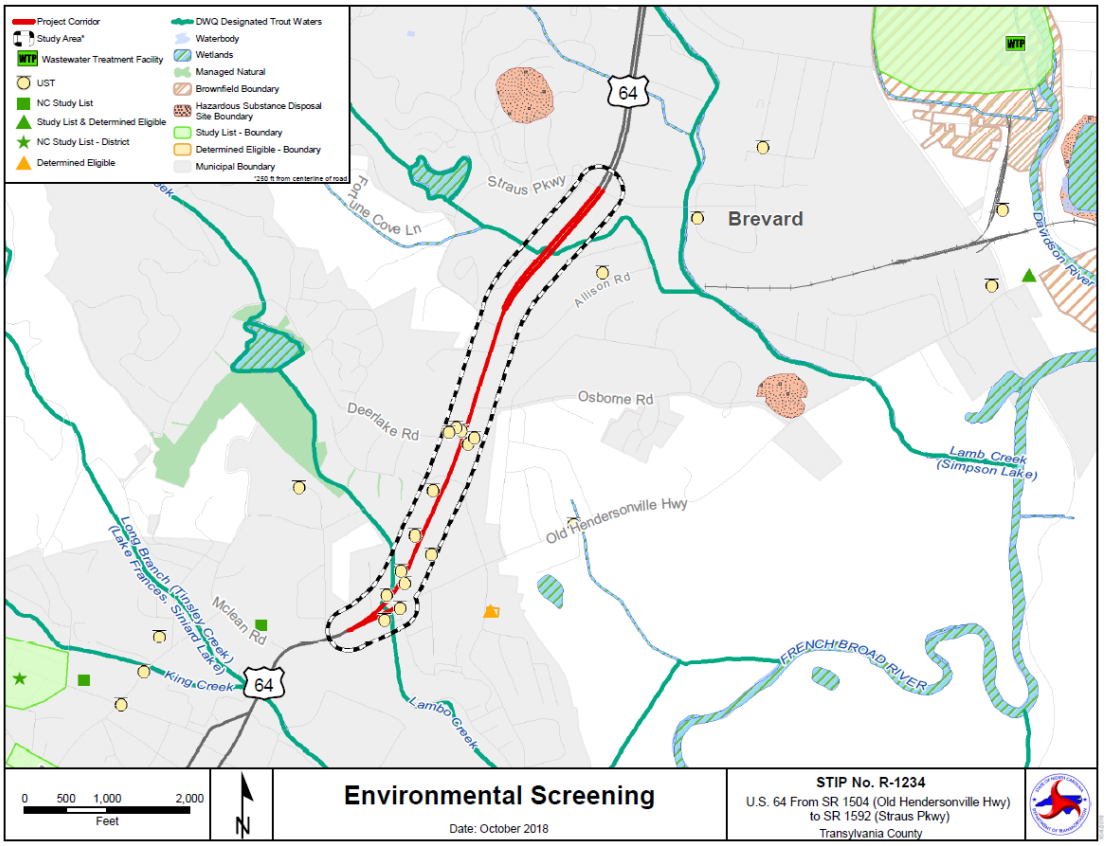
be needed for an NCDOT project, including those prepared for a Natural Resources Technical Report, Section 106 Consultation, Community Studies Reports, and Jurisdictional Resource Determinations.

Using screening-level data, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should identify known resources in the human and natural environment within the general study area. NCDOT Subject Matter Experts should assist the NCDOT Project Manager in determining if the available data is complete and valid or if more research may be needed and why. Resources that should be screened at this point in the project development process include, but are not limited to:

- Threatened and endangered species;
- Jurisdictional resources (i.e., streams and wetlands);
- Historic properties;
- FEMA floodplains; and
- Basic community characteristics, such as potential Environmental Justice communities, community resources, schools, and churches.

The general study area and identified resources should be presented on an Environmental Screening Map. The Environmental Screening Map, which can be built from the project area map, is an effective tool for orienting project team members and other stakeholders to the resources that may be affected by a project. An example Environmental Screening Map is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Example Environmental Screening Map



Identify Potential Issues and Constraints

Conducting a red-flag review during initial project coordination helps the NCDOT Project Manager characterize which issues and constraints are decision-drivers and which are less important. With the assistance of the NCDOT Subject Matter Experts, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should identify the factors that have the potential to affect the design, permitting, and constructability of the project. Characteristics that should be investigated include, but are not limited to:

- Physical or engineering constraints (i.e., status and condition of existing facilities; known geo-environmental and geotechnical issues)
- Relevant considerations (i.e., other projects planned or underway near the project; traffic management or detours; unique federal, state, and local land management areas; railroad involvement).

The goal of this research is to identify and prioritize the issues that will play a major role in the project development process. This review of information will also help to identify areas that may require action to facilitate compliance, and issues that are not anticipated to be significant. This results in a more efficient and effective use of resources because the project team should be able to better focus on substantive topics.

It may also be beneficial for the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant to conduct a brief review of any strong support for, or opposition to, a proposed project. Early identification of substantial interest in a proposed project can facilitate the development of a more effective public involvement plan.

Discuss Possible Solutions (Alternatives)

Once there is a clear understanding of the problem and the constraints and issues have been identified, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant can begin brainstorming possible solutions, or **alternatives**. At a minimum, to be considered viable, an alternative must meet the project's purpose and need.

The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should start by reviewing the alternatives scenario analysis from long range planning documents and/or a feasibility study, if available. Reviewing these reports will provide the NCDOT Project Manager with a basic understanding of the depth of analysis that has already been conducted for the project. With the assistance of the NCDOT Subject Matter Experts, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should review and validate the accuracy and timeliness of:

- Strategies that have already been tried;
- Strategies that were analyzed during the CTP but not recommended; and the
- Long-Range Plan Recommended Alternative.

Depending on when the long range planning or feasibility study was conducted, the project area and/or range of possible solutions may have changed. Something that may have not been feasible in the past could be feasible now, and vice versa. If potential solutions are not carried forward in the project development process, it is important for the NCDOT Project Manager to define why they were

determined unreasonable or unacceptable. These reasons may include failure to meet the purpose and need; physical constraints or impacts to the natural or human environment; or conflicts with community goals and values.

It is critical that the NCDOT Project Manager ensure the project's purpose and need is developed and supported enough to facilitate a meaningful discussion of potential alternatives, and the NCDOT Project Manager should guide the project team in identifying the apparent advantages and disadvantages of the options under consideration. Defining the criteria or factors that should be used to evaluate potential alternatives (i.e., evaluation criteria) will help the project team differentiate the preferred alternative from other alternatives considered. The analysis of alternatives is a vital part of the project development process.

Determine Whether the Project will Advance through the Merger Process

As noted above, the Merger Process provides a forum for appropriate agency representatives to discuss and reach consensus on ways to meet the regulatory requirements of Section 404 of the Clean Water Act during the NEPA/SEPA decision-making phase of transportation projects. Typical Merger Process participants include NCDOT, FHWA, USACE, and NCDEQ. If a project does not involve federal funding, the Merger Process may still be applicable; however, it would be implemented without FHWA participation.

Environmental Documents prepared pursuant to SEPA and NEPA include Environmental Assessments (EAs); Findings of No Significant Impact (FONSIs); Environmental Impact Statements (EISs); and Records of Decision (RODs).

Supporting Environmental Documentation is prepared to demonstrate that an environmental review pursuant to SEPA and/or NEPA is not necessary because the proposed project falls below certain thresholds. Supporting Environmental Documentation includes Minimum Criteria Determination Checklists (MCDCs); Categorical Exclusions (CEs); and Consultations / Re-evaluations.

To determine if a project should proceed through the Merger Process, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should conduct a **Merger Screening**. Merger Screening typically occurs during initial project coordination, and entails a review of all the information that has been gathered to-date. While the Merger Process is an option for all NCDOT projects, it is important to consider the potential for competing resources within the project's study area, and the intensity of the impacts that may occur. This consideration of competing resources should help to determine the basis for carrying projects through the Merger Process.

For example, if a road is widened to the left, a wetland may be impacted. If that same road is widened to the right, a historic property may be impacted. In this example, the Merger Process would allow agency representatives to work more efficiently (through a quicker and more comprehensive evaluation and resolution of issues) and help to document how competing agency mandates are balanced during a shared decision-making process.

If the project should clearly be screened either in or out of the Merger Process, the NCDOT Project Manager should reach a preliminary determination (i.e., through Internal Scoping) prior to formal coordination with regulatory and resources agencies (i.e., External Scoping). The NCDOT Project Manager should communicate the preliminary determination to the Merger Team and confirm concurrence with the planned approach.

If the project is complex, the Merger Team does not agree with NCDOT's preliminary determination, and/or new concerns are brought forward by stakeholders during initial project coordination, the NCDOT Project Manager should hold a meeting or conference call to help resolve the screening-related questions or concerns. During this meeting or conference call, relevant information can be discussed and a decision can be made on the applicability of the Merger Process for the project.

Once a determination has been agreed upon by NCDOT and the regulatory and resource agencies, the NCDOT Project Manager must clearly document whether the project will proceed through the Merger Process. For projects not proceeding through the Merger Process, this determination can be documented in a memo to file. If the project is proceeding through the Merger Process, this determination can be documented in an email distribution to the Merger Team or explicitly noted in a meeting summary.

If the project is screened into the Merger Process, a combined External Scoping Meeting/Concurrence Point (CP) 1 Meeting should be held. The purpose the External Scoping/CP 1 meeting is to begin early coordination efforts with regulatory and resource agencies and other stakeholders, and discuss and concur on the project's purpose and need and general study area. This meeting is intended to establish the foundation and justification of the project. Agency representatives are responsible for researching their resources and gathering data on possible constraints and issues relevant to the project area.

Concurrence Points are defining points in the Merger Process. Concurrence implies that each Merger Team member and the agency they represent agrees to decisions made and pledges to abide by the decision moving forward. Concurrence is sequential and must be achieved in order.

A combined External Scoping Meeting/CP 1 Meeting must be clearly stated in the meeting invitation so that all attendees are prepared, and the NCDOT Project Manager should coordinate with the USACE representative in advance. External Scoping/CP 1 Meetings should be scheduled on Merger Meeting days, if possible. For additional information on the Merger Process, please refer to Chapter X of the Procedures Manual.

Plan the Project's Approach

Throughout initial project coordination, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant can use input that is provided to refine the overall project approach and schedule. When refining the project approach and schedule, it is critical for the NCDOT Project Manager to consider key issues and determinations that have resulted from initial project coordination (i.e., the level of environmental review, potential permitting needs, extent of public involvement). The input that is gathered by the project team can help

the NCDOT Project Manager determine whether a traditional approach to the project development process is appropriate, or if a hybrid approach may be beneficial.

For example, a project that is not on an accelerated schedule can follow the traditional sequence of events (i.e., Start of Study letter, Internal Scoping Meeting, Merger Screening, External Scoping Meeting). The traditional approach is beneficial for larger, more complex projects with numerous stakeholders. Alternatively, if a project is on an accelerated schedule, or it has been determined that an in-person scoping meeting is not necessary, the NCDOT Project Manager may choose to employ a hybrid approach. A hybrid approach entails streamlining the outreach that's conducted during initial project coordination. In lieu of a Start of Study letter and an in-person scoping meeting, the NCDOT Project Manager could circulate a project information package that includes a cover letter (like the Start of Study letter), and information like the materials distributed in advance of an external scoping meeting.

Regardless of the approach, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should focus on the critical path items, which are the items that must be done on time if a project is to be completed on schedule. The NCDOT Project Manager should also identify risks or challenges to meeting the project schedule, and begin planning for how they may be addressed. With the assistance of the project team, the NCDOT Project Manager can assess the areas that need a greater level of effort, if there is an opportunity to streamline technical reports, and which tasks can be executed concurrently.

Communicate Information with the Project Team

As noted at the beginning of Section 4, initial project coordination is not a one-size-fits-all process. However, a key tenet of all successful projects is **effective communication**, and this should be an exchange of information between all parties.

Building a contact list at this stage in the project development process is a great way for the NCDOT Project Manager to maintain an inventory of the stakeholders who should be informed as the project progresses. The NCDOT Project Manager should include all parties that have expressed interest in the project and/or have been coordinated with to-date. For example, residents or businesses who have reached out to NCDOT with questions, as well as agencies that have participated in initial project coordination, should be added to the contact list. Merger Team members, local stakeholders, regulatory and resource agency representatives, and internal NCDOT project team members should also be included. This contact list can be used for routine project communications, invitee lists for meetings, and as the foundation of the distribution list for the Environmental Document or Supporting Environmental Documentation.

Through initial project coordination, the NCDOT Project Manager should have identified a project's purpose; the real issues that have the potential to influence it; and the plan for executing the project's development and design. Depending on the type of project and its complexity, this information can be communicated to the project team and participating agencies through various means, including conference calls, email exchanges, and in-person meetings. In-person coordination meetings (i.e., External Scoping Meetings) are not required for all projects but are strongly encouraged. For meeting

resources such as sample agenda topics and questions for discussion, please refer to Section 6 of this chapter.

All substantive communication, whether in-person or on the phone, should be documented and distributed to the project team in a timely manner. The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should summarize main discussion topics, decisions, next steps, and meeting outcomes. Formal meeting summaries should be distributed to the project team for review and retained in the project folder. This documentation is key to building a defensible administrative file for the project.

Next Steps

Initial project coordination culminates after the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant have conducted formal coordination with regulatory and resource agencies. Communication and coordination should continue throughout the life of the project development process; however, the NCDOT Project Manager's focus should shift from collecting input to incorporating that input into the project's design and environmental review.

5. Checklist

The following checklist identifies the key steps that are described in Section 4 above.

Sequence	NCDOT Project Manager Action	Status
1	Once the project has been assigned, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should participate in **Contract Scoping**.	
2	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should **review existing information** and look for **opportunities to streamline** the project development process.	
3	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should **define project limits**, paying special attention to the presence of **logical termini** and **independent utility.**	
4	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should develop the project's **purpose and need** and ensure availability of **supporting information and technical studies**.	
5	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should define the **general study area** and screen for **environmental features**.	
6	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should conduct a **red-flag review** for potential issues, including **physical or engineering constraints** and **other relevant considerations**.	
7	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should begin brainstorming **viable alternatives** that meet the project's **purpose and need**.	
8	As project information is gathered, it is important for the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant to conduct **Internal Scoping**. If warranted or desired, the NCDOT Project Manager should hold an **Internal Scoping Meeting**.	
9	The NCDOT Project Manager should use the information collected to-date and conduct a **Merger Screening**. The NCDOT Project Manager should **communicate** this preliminary determination to project team members and other interested stakeholders.	
10	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should conduct formal coordination with regulatory and resources agencies (i.e., **External Scoping**). If warranted or desired, the NCDOT Project Manager should hold an **External Scoping Meeting**, or a **Combined Scoping Meeting**.	
11	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should plan the project's approach and next steps. This includes refining the **project schedule** and **contact list**.	
12	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should **maintain communication** with the project team and other interested stakeholders.	
13	The NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should **incorporate** the input that's been collected into the project's design and environmental review.	

6. Standardized Email and Letter Templates

This section provides the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant with resources to facilitate initial project coordination. A Start of Study letter template, hybrid distribution package cover letter template, Project Data Sheet template, and meeting resources (e.g., sample agendas and discussion questions) are provided. Use of this information is not required, but it is strongly encouraged.

Start of Study Letter

The Start of Study letter is an opportunity for the NCDOT Project Manager to inform agencies and other stakeholders about the start of the project development process. The letter can invite their comments as well as offering them a chance to request to be involved throughout the life of the project. If a project is not on an accelerated schedule and is likely to follow the "traditional" sequence of events (i.e., internal scoping meeting, Merger Screening, external scoping meeting), the NCDOT Project Manager should distribute a Start of Study letter.

In the past, NCDOT has typically only sent the Start of Study letter to agencies or other stakeholders whom NCDOT does not normally coordinate with about the start of the project development. However, to streamline communication, the NCDOT Project Manager and their Consultant should send the Start of Study letter to all potentially interested agencies and municipalities. Typical recipients include:

- Agencies with regulatory or land interests (TVA, FERC, USACE, USFS, NPS, USFWS);
- Tribal nations;
- Municipalities;
- Board of Transportation member; and
- MPOs and RPOs.

Hybrid Distribution Package Cover Letter

If a project is on an accelerated schedule, or it has been determined that an in-person scoping meeting is not necessary, the NCDOT Project Manager may choose to circulate a hybrid distribution package. The hybrid distribution package includes a cover letter that is similar to the Start of Study letter, as well as the information that would be distributed in advance of an external scoping meeting. Typical recipients should include anyone that would receive a Start of Study letter and entities that would be invited to participate in internal and external scoping.

Project Data Sheet

The Project Data Sheet provides interested parties with the basic "need-to-know" information. The Project Data Sheet can be modified and supplemented on a project-specific basis.

Meeting Resources

The Meeting Resources identify the types of information that should be covered at a scoping meeting, as well as questions that should be addressed.

Start of Study Letter Template

MEMORANDUM

May 29, 2019

FROM: NCDOT Project Manager

NCDOT Division/Unit

SUBJECT: Start of Study Memo for the **project description/limits** in **City/Town, County**, North Carolina, TIP No. **Y-XXXX**

NCDOT **Division/Unit** is beginning the project development, environmental, and engineering studies for the [insert project name/STIP number] project (project). The project proposes to [insert brief project description]. The project is included in the North Carolina Department of Transportation's 20XX-20XX State Transportation Improvement Program and is scheduled for right of way in fiscal year 20XX and construction in fiscal year 20XX. Figure 1 shows the vicinity map for the proposed project.

NCDOT staff or their consultants may be contacting you to request project-specific information. While we do not expect a response to this notification, we welcome your input if you have time-sensitive concerns. Your input will be used in the development of environmental documentation prepared pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act and/or State Environmental Policy Act. We would appreciate any information that may be helpful in evaluating the potential environmental effects of the proposed project, as well as recommended alternatives to be considered. If applicable, please identify any permits or approvals which may be required by your organization.

If you have any questions concerning the project, please contact me at [insert phone number] or by email at [insert email address]. Please include the STIP Project Number (**Y-XXX**) in all correspondence and comments.

Sincerely,

[insert NCDOT Project Manager Name]

Attachments (vicinity map)

Hybrid Distribution Package Cover Letter Template

MEMORANDUM

May 29, 2019

FROM: NCDOT Project Manager

NCDOT Division/Unit

SUBJECT: Project Information for the **project description/limits** in **City/Town, County**, North Carolina, TIP No. **Y-XXXX**

NCDOT **Division/Unit** is beginning the project development, environmental, and engineering studies for the [insert project name/STIP number] project (project). The project proposes to [insert brief project description]. The project is included in the North Carolina Department of Transportation's 20XX-20XX State Transportation Improvement Program and is scheduled for right of way in fiscal year 20XX and construction in fiscal year 20XX. Figure 1 shows the vicinity map for the proposed project. NCDOT is preparing [insert type of Environmental Document or Supporting Environmental Documentation]. NCDOT has made the preliminary determination that the project [will/will not] proceed through the Merger Process.

In lieu of holding an in-person scoping meeting, NCDOT is providing the attached project information and maps. We welcome your input on the proposed project ([insert STIP number]), and we would appreciate any information that may be helpful in evaluating the potential environmental effects. If applicable, please identify any permits or approvals that may be required by your organization. Please provide your input by [insert date].

If you have any questions concerning the project, please contact Project Manager [insert NCDOT Project Manager name and contact information]. Please include the STIP Project Numbers in all correspondence and comments.

Sincerely,

[insert NCDOT Project Manager name]

Attachments

Project Data Sheet

Project Data Sheet Template

North Carolina Department of Transportation

Project Data Sheet

Essential Project Information	
STIP Project Name	
STIP Number	
County	
NCDOT Division	
ROW Date	
LET Date	
Schedule Considerations	*Is the project being accelerated? Is the project tied to another project? Is it design build?*
Cost Estimates	*Are there any cost estimates beyond those included in the STIP (i.e., those included in a feasibility study)?*
Funding Type	*Is federal or state funding being used? Are there any special funding considerations like grants or local funds?*

Proposed Project Details	
Project Description	
Project Limits	
Typical Section	
Access Control	
Design Speed	
Right-of-Way Width	
Physical or Engineering Constraints	*These may include rivers, cemeteries, geologic constraints, utilities, and other concerns that could drive the alternatives and/or create potential design exceptions.*
Other Considerations	
Survey Request Date	
Design Plan	
Construction Recommendation	*Include relevant information from the Construction Recommendation Excel Sheet.*
Consultant Involvement	*Did the consultant begin work under a Limited Notice to Proceed? If so, what is the anticipated date for Task Order 2?*

Project History	
Planning Studies	
SPOT Description	*Provide the project description from the most recent SPOT analysis.*
Feasibility Studies	*Describe any feasibility studies that have included the project corridor.*
Problem Statement	*Provide any previous problem statements from the CTP or Feasibility Study.*
Alternatives Previously Dismissed and Why	

Purpose & Need	
Purpose	*Provide the purpose of the project, if one has been identified in prior planning studies.*

Need(s)	*Provide the need for the project, if one has been identified in prior planning studies.*
Supporting Data	*Are there any studies or other documents that demonstrate the need for the project? For example, if the project is needed because of traffic congestion, has a forecast been prepared?*

Alternatives Currently Under Consideration	
Alternative 1	
Alternative 2	

Public and Agency Coordination	
Anticipated Permits	*Describe potential 404 permitting and any other anticipated permits (CAMA, FERC, TVA, US Coast Guard, etc.)*
Federal Agency Involvement	*Who is the lead federal agency? Which agencies will be otherwise involved?*
Public Involvement Strategy	*This is different and more inclusive than a Public Involvement Plan. A public involvement strategy is dynamic and subject to change.*
Merger Screening Date	*Was the project screened into Merger? What issues arose during screening?*
Potential Merger Triggers	

Existing Conditions	
Functional Classification	
Strategic Highway Corridor	
AADT	
Access Control	
Typical Section	
Right-of-Way Width	
Posted Speed	
Structures (bridges, RCBC, etc.)	
Railroad Involvement	
Other Adjacent STIP Projects	

Preliminary Resource Inventory Table	
Utilities	
Hazardous Materials	
Known Potentially-Eligible National Register of Historic Places Sites/Districts	
Other Cultural Resources	*Known archaeological resources? Tribal resources? Other potentially historic properties or districts?*
Wetlands	
Streams	
FEMA Floodplain Detailed Study Area	
Water Supply Watersheds	
Riparian Buffer Rules	
Active Agriculture	

Parks, Greenways, Game Lands, Section 4(f) & Section 6(f) Properties	
Environmental Justice Populations	
Other Resources (i.e., Wild and Scenic Rivers, TVA, Scenic Byways, etc.)	*Wild and Scenic Rivers? TVA Properties? Scenic Byways? Describe unique resources and what is known about them.*

Project Management Approval	
The need for the proposed change is sufficient to justify the impacts to the scope, schedule, and budget.	
Project Manager	
Name	
Signature	
Date	
Supervisor	
Name	
Signature	
Date	

Attach General Study Area Map and CE Screening Report Here

Meeting Resources

The following information is an outline of the general agenda topics for scoping meetings. The agenda topics essentially mirror the objectives of initial project coordination. At the end of a scoping meeting, the NCDOT Project Manager should be able to successfully address the data needs identified herein.

1. Orientation to the Project Problem, its History and Context

The purpose of this topic is to examine known information and ask questions about the problem and its origin to fully understand what the problem is, what is causing it, and the context or setting of the problem. You are essentially "telling the story" of the transportation problem and the project it is to become.

- Introduce and explain the problem. Review the problem statement. Cover information such as the existing transportation facilities and services, the nature of the transportation problem, where it occurs, why it occurs, its severity, duration, etc.
- Examine the existing data from long range planning that supports and demonstrates the transportation problem. Determine whether the data is still sound and valid. Is the problem adequately defined and supported by data? If not, what type of data would be needed to help characterize and demonstrate the problem?
- Discuss the project limits in the context of logical termini and independent utility. Establish what the physical or geographical scope of the project would be.
- Solicit questions and comments about the purpose and need of the project. Assess if there are major questions and concerns about the existence of a transportation problem.
- Provide an overview of the overall schedule, programming, and funding.

2. Understand Resources in Area and Identify Issues, Constraints, Questions

Defining the substantive issues allows for better utilization of everyone's time since it will be easy to identify when the project team is placing too much time and effort on an issue that, in the end, will not make a difference in the final decision. It also assists with meeting facilitation so that meetings are spent on the major decision-driving issues and not in long discussions on less important issues.

As part of the discussion on the orientation to the project problem (topic 1), the group should already have a sense of the overall characteristics of the project's setting and involved resources. Now it is time to give each participant an opportunity to provide input relative to specific resources or topics. It may be helpful to go around the room and allow each representative at the meeting to discuss any known or anticipated issues, past experiences, or point out where data or information gaps exist. After this part of the meeting, engage the representatives that have not offered any information or comments. Silence should not be taken as an indication that there are no issues or concerns.

Results of this part of the meeting will feed into determining the next steps and actions for the project. Topics to cover include:

- Pedestrian traffic and facilities

- Known natural and human resources in the area
- Known GeoEnvironmental issues and Geotechnical issues
- Projects planned or underway in proximity of the project
- Status and condition of existing structures (if applicable)
- Potential engineering design constraints
- Potential issues or concerns with constructability, traffic management, detours
- Potential railroad involvement
- Key people or groups that should be involved in the project development process
- Public involvement: what should be conducted and timeframes?
- Class of action or documentation (EIS, EA, etc.)? Federal or state?

3. Discuss Ideas for Potential Solutions

Once there is a clear understanding of the problem and the constraints and issues have been identified based on existing data, start looking at potential solutions. Start with the alternatives scenario analysis from long-range planning and/or the feasibility study for the project if they are available and proceed from there. Reviewing these reports will also give the team a feel for the depth of analysis already performed in the study. Topics to cover include:

- The solutions that have already been tried. Knowing this information and documenting it demonstrates to the resource agencies that we have worked to use inexpensive, low-impact solutions, but they are no longer adequate.
- The solutions that were analyzed during the long-range planning process or feasibility study that are not recommended and why they were not recommended.
- The Long Rang Plan recommended alternative and why it was recommended.
- Any other potential solutions that have not been suggested.
- Identify the criteria that will be important to use to evaluate the alternatives as the project progresses.
- Identify if any additional data (e.g. traffic-related, resource specific, etc.) may be needed to help evaluate potential alternatives and/or assist with future design work. You need to understand what exactly is needed, how you would use it, and how it would help make project decisions before deciding to collect the data.

4. Plan the Project's Approach and Next Steps

Once there is a clear understanding of the project, the results of discussions and meetings can be used to define or refine the project schedule, the immediate next steps and actions, and the overall approach or strategy for the project. Topics to cover include:

- Discuss the overall project schedule. As the next steps are determined, consider how the timeline for those actions affect or fit into the overall project schedule.
- Identify the key issues and determinations that have resulted from the meeting and lay out the next steps. Finalize the next steps for each of the units with due dates.
- Identify any threats or challenges to meeting the project schedule. How should they be addressed?

7. Status of this Guidance

This guidance was prepared in May 2019. To confirm the information contained in this chapter is current, the NCDOT Project Manager should check the record of revisions on the NCDOT Connect site.