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§ 771.111 Early coordination, public involvement, and project development.

(a)(1) Early coordination with appropriate agencies and the public aids in determining the type of environmental review documents an action requires, the scope of the document, the level of analysis, and related environmental requirements. This involves the exchange of information from the inception of a proposal for action to preparation of the environmental review documents.

Applicants intending to apply for funds should notify the Administration at the time that a project concept is identified. When requested, the Administration will advise the applicant, insofar as possible, of the probable class of action and related environmental laws and requirements and of the need for specific studies and findings which would normally be developed concurrently with the environmental review documents.

(2) The information and results produced by, or in support of, the transportation planning process may be incorporated into environmental review documents in accordance with 40 CFR 1502.21 and 23 CFR 450.212 or 450.318.3

(b) The Administration will identify the probable class of action as soon as sufficient information is available to identify the probable impacts of the action.

(c) When both the FHWA and FTA are involved in the development of a project, or when the FHWA or FTA acts as a joint lead agency with another Federal agency, a mutually acceptable process will be established on a case-by-case basis.

(d) During the early coordination process, the lead agencies may request other agencies having an interest in the action to participate, and must invite such agencies if the action is subject to the project development procedures in 23 U.S.C. 139.4 Agencies with special expertise may be invited to become cooperating agencies. Agencies with jurisdiction by law must be requested to become cooperating agencies.

(e) Other States, and Federal land management entities, that may be significantly affected by the action or by any of the alternatives shall be notified early and their views solicited by the applicant in cooperation with the Administration. The Administration will prepare a written evaluation of any significant unresolved issues and furnish it to the applicant for incorporation into the environmental assessment (EA) or draft EIS.

(f) In order to ensure meaningful evaluation of alternatives and to avoid

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Commitments to transportation improvements before they are fully evaluated, the action evaluated in each EIS or finding of no significant impact (FONSI) shall:

(1) Connect logical termini and be of sufficient length to address environmental matters on a broad scope;

(2) Have independent utility or independent significance, i.e., be usable and be a reasonable expenditure even if no additional transportation improvements in the area are made; and

(3) Not restrict consideration of alternatives for other reasonably foreseeable transportation improvements.

(g) For major transportation actions, the tiering of EISs as discussed in the CEQ regulation (40 CFR 1502.20) may be appropriate. The first tier EIS would focus on broad issues such as general location, mode choice, and areawide air quality and land use implications of the major alternatives. The second tier would address site-specific details on project impacts, costs, and mitigation measures.

(h) For the Federal-aid highway program:

(1) Each State must have procedures approved by the FHWA to carry out a public involvement/public hearing program pursuant to 23 U.S.C. 128 and 139 and CEQ regulation.

(2) State public involvement/public hearing procedures must provide for:

(i) Coordination of public involvement activities and public hearings with the entire NEPA process.

(ii) Early and continuing opportunities during project development for the public to be involved in the identification of social, economic, and environmental impacts, as well as impacts associated with relocation of individuals, groups, or institutions.

(iii) One or more public hearings or the opportunity for hearing(s) to be held by the State highway agency at a convenient time and place for any Federal-aid project which requires significant amounts of right-of-way, substantially changes the layout or functions of connecting roadways or of the facility being improved, has a substantial adverse impact on abutting property, otherwise has a significant social, economic, environmental or other effect, or for which the FHWA determines that a public hearing is in the public interest.

(iv) Reasonable notice to the public of either a public hearing or the opportunity for a public hearing. Such notice will indicate the availability of explanatory information. The notice shall also provide information required to comply with public involvement requirements of other laws, Executive orders, and regulations.

(v) Explanation at the public hearing of the following information, as appropriate:

(A) The project’s purpose, need, and consistency with the goals and objectives of any local urban planning.

(B) The project’s alternatives, and major design features.

(C) The social, economic, environmental, and other impacts of the project.

(D) The relocation assistance program and the right-of-way acquisition process.

(E) The State highway agency’s procedures for receiving both oral and written statements from the public.

(vi) Submission to the FHWA of a transcript of each public hearing and a certification that a required hearing or hearing opportunity was offered. The transcript will be accompanied by copies of all written statements from the public, both submitted at the public hearing or during an announced period after the public hearing.

(vii) An opportunity for public involvement in defining the purpose and need and the range of alternatives, for any action subject to the project development procedures in 23 U.S.C. 139.

(viii) Public notice and an opportunity for public review and comment on a Section 4(f) de minimis impact finding, in accordance with 49 U.S.C. 303(d).5

(3) Based on the reevaluation of project environmental documents required by §771.129, the FHWA and the State highway agency will determine whether changes in the project or new

5The FHWA and FTA have developed guidance on Section 4(f) de minimis impact findings titled “Guidance for Determining De Minimis Impacts to Section 4(f) Resources,” December 13, 2005, which is available at http://www.fhwa.dot.gov or in hard copy upon request.
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Timing of Administration activities.

(a) The lead agencies, in cooperation with the applicant (if not a lead agency), will perform the work necessary to complete a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) or a record of decision (ROD) and comply with other related environmental laws and regulations to the maximum extent possible during the NEPA process. This work includes environmental studies, related engineering studies, agency coordination and public involvement. However, final design activities, property acquisition, purchase of construction materials or rolling stock, or project construction shall not proceed until the following have been completed, except as otherwise provided in law or in paragraph (d) of this section:

(i) The action has been classified as a categorical exclusion (CE), or

(ii) A FONSI has been approved, or

(iii) A final EIS has been approved and available for the prescribed period of time and a record of decision has been signed;

(2) For actions proposed for FHWA funding, the Administration has received and accepted the certifications and any required public hearing transcripts required by 23 U.S.C. 128;

(3) For activities proposed for FHWA funding, the programming requirements of 23 CFR part 450, subpart B, and 23 CFR part 630, subpart A, have been met.

(b) Completion of the requirements set forth in paragraphs (a)(1) and (2) of this section is considered acceptance of the general project location and concepts described in the environmental review documents unless otherwise specified by the approving official.

(c) Letters of Intent issued under the authority of 49 U.S.C. 5309(g) are used by FTA to indicate an intention to obligate future funds for multi-year capital transit projects. Letters of Intent will not be issued by FTA until the NEPA process is completed.

(d) The prohibition in paragraph (a)(1) of this section is limited by the following exceptions:

(1) Exceptions for hardship and protective acquisitions of real property are addressed in paragraph (d)(12) of §771.117.

(2) Paragraph (d)(13) of §771.117 contains an exception for the acquisition of pre-existing railroad right-of-way for future transit use in accordance with 49 U.S.C. 5324(c).

(3) FHWA regulations at 23 CFR 710.503 establish conditions for FHWA approval of Federal-aid highway funding for hardship and protective acquisitions.

(4) FHWA regulations at 23 CFR 710.501 address early acquisition of right-of-way by a State prior to the execution of a project agreement with the FHWA or completion of NEPA. In paragraphs (b) and (c) of §710.501, the regulation establishes conditions governing subsequent requests for Federal-