

# Streamlining a Congestion Bottleneck Project

## Reference Links

- Streamlining/Stewardship, FHWA(Direct to: <http://environment.fhwa.dot.gov/strmlng/index.asp>)

The ultimate goal of transportation decision making is to deliver transportation improvements to the public. The goal of collaboration is to achieve better project outcomes as efficiently as possible - effectively streamlining project delivery. Collaboration strategies such as early engagement of outside partners, advance mitigation, and linking MPO planning with NEPA decision making all support streamlining transportation decision making. When the full decision making partnership supports the need for an improvement project and has the right data and analysis to advance this need, project streamlining can occur.

Bottleneck improvements address a confined problem area where the existing design or operation of a road or bridge limits traffic flow which results in congestion. One characteristic of "bottleneck" problems is that overall congestion in the corridor may be significantly reduced if improvements were made to this limited segment or bridge.

Streamlining projects to address bottlenecks is relatively easy because generally: (1) improvement options are limited, (2) the scope is evident, (3) logical termini are easily defined. Where the formal partners (MPO, state DOT, FHWA/FTA and relevant resource agencies) agree on these three issues early in the long range planning process, the potential exists to streamline a bottleneck improvement by initiating the NEPA/permitting process and coordinating the environmental review process with the completion of long range planning.

Environmental review studies and long range planning are always parallel processes---projects "in the pipeline" are easily accounted for during long range planning. However, more often than not these processes are not coordinated; putting the long range plan at risk for a rework when a NEPA recommended alternative is not consistent with the project concept in the long range plan. NEPA alternatives, long range plans, and TIPs that are not consistent can result in:

- No funding available to complete design and construction of a project that has received FHWA or FTA Record of Decision approval
- Cost and time associated with an off-cycle update of the LRP to incorporate a NEPA recommended alternative
- Risk of a major delay if the NEPA recommended alternative is not sufficiently supported by the MPO to be incorporated into the long range plan
- Risk that the NEPA recommended alternative cannot be accommodated within the fiscal constraint and/or air quality conformity requirements of the LRP and/or TIP

The Streamlining a Bottleneck Project application avoids these problems by identifying the threshold criteria that should be in place before streamlining a bottleneck improvement is initiated (More about the threshold criteria is available below). This provides the opportunity to highlight those key decisions in long range planning environmental review and programming where communication between plan and project teams should be initiated and consistency checks should be made. These "check-in" points broaden the perspective and knowledge of both technical staff and the policy decision makers. This action will also incorporate consideration of the potential benefits and risks to both the LRP and the environment review/permitting process as key decisions are executed (More information about both potential benefits and risks is available below).

The decision to streamline a bottleneck project requires careful evaluation of the information available to support this action. Because the Decision Guide represents the federally mandated transportation decision making process as it exists today, specific key decisions can support a more coordinated and concurrent process in which the various partners address decisions simultaneously instead of consecutively across phases. With this application the identified and agreed to project concept can move directly into environmental review from the very early steps of long range planning.

### Long Range Transportation Planning

- LRP-1 - Approve Scope of LRTP Process  
Scoping involves a broad assessment of the data, decisions, and relationships to consider throughout the development of the LRTP.
- LRP-2 - Approve Vision and Goals  
The community's values are used to guide the transportation-specific vision and goals.
- LRP-3 - Approve Evaluation Criteria, Methods and Measures  
The evaluation criteria, methodology and performance measures are approved to allow comparisons of scenarios to the vision and goals and to one another.
- LRP-4 - Approve Transportation Deficiencies  
The approved list of specific corridors, roads and areas which are deficient.
- LRP-5 - Approve Financial Assumptions  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- LRP-6 - Approve Strategies  
This key decision is not associated with application.

- LRP-7 - Approve Plan Scenarios  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- LRP-8 - Adopt Preferred Plan Scenario  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- LRP-9 - Make Conformity Determination by MPO  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- LRP-10 - Adopt LRTP by MPO  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- LRP-11 - Make Conformity Determination  
This key decision is not associated with application.

## Programming

- PRO-1 - Approve Revenue Sources  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- PRO-2 - Approve Methodology for Identifying Project Costs and Criteria for Allocating Revenue  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- PRO-3 - Approve Project List Drawn from Adopted Plan Scenario or Solution Set  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- PRO-4 - Approve Project Prioritization  
The implications of advancing this project to the existing prioritization are identified and reconciled.
- PRO-5 - Reach Consensus on Draft TIP  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- PRO-6 - Adopt TIP by MPO  
Partner agencies agree to the necessary changes to the TIP to advance the project.
- PRO-7 - Approve TIP by Governor and Incorporate into Draft STIP  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- PRO-8 - Reach Consensus on Draft STIP  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- PRO-9 - Approve STIP with respect to Fiscal Constraint  
This key decision is not associated with application.

## Corridor Planning

- COR-1 - Approve Scope of Corridor Planning Process  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- COR-2 - Approve Problem Statements and Opportunities  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- COR-3 - Approve Goals for the Corridor  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- COR-4 - Reach Consensus on Scope of Environmental Review and Analysis  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- COR-5 - Approve Evaluation Criteria, Methods and Measures  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- COR-6 - Approve Range of Solution Sets  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- COR-7 - Adopt Preferred Solution Set  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- COR-8 - Approve Evaluation Criteria, Methods and Measures for Prioritization of Projects  
This key decision is not associated with application.
- COR-9 - Adopt Priorities for Implementation  
This key decision is not associated with application.

## Environmental Review/NEPA Merged with Permitting

- ENV-1 - Reach Consensus on Scope of Environmental Review  
Documented agreement and supporting information is provided from Long Range Planning to the scoping of the identified project.
- ENV-2 - Approve Notice of Intent  
Required to satisfy the NEPA legal requirement of publishing a Notice of Intent (NOI).
- ENV-3 - Approve Purpose and Need/Reach Consensus on Project Purpose  
Information related to the regional context and the specific deficiencies developed during LRP is used to inform the development of purpose and need.
- ENV-4 - Reach Consensus on Study Area  
Agreement is reached on an initial geographic area of study which will encompass all alternatives considered.
- ENV-5 - Approve Evaluation Criteria, Methods and Measures  
Approved methodology and criteria for evaluation of project alternatives.
- ENV-6 - Approve Full Range of Alternatives  
Initial selection of all alternatives that meet the project purpose and need.
- ENV-7 - Approve Alternatives to be Carried Forward  
Final selection of alternatives for consideration

- ENV-8 - Approve Draft EIS with Conceptual Mitigation  
Approved Draft EIS is released for public comment
- ENV-9 - Approve Resource Agency Public Notice  
Satisfies the regulatory requirement for Section 404 permitting that the public receive notice of a permit application.
- ENV-10 - Approve Preferred Alternative / LEDPA  
The preferred alternative must remain consistent with the project concept in the adopted preferred plan scenario.
- ENV-11 - Approve Final Jurisdictional Determination  
Agreement required to satisfy Section 404 permitting requirements
- ENV-12 - Reach Consensus on Avoidance and Minimization for the LEDPA  
Agreed to avoidance and minimization on the LEDPA must remain consistent with the adopted long range plan.
- ENV-13 - Approve Final EIS  
Alternative selected for implementation is reconciled with available funding and project prioritization
- ENV-14 - Approve the Record of Decision
- ENV-15 - Render Permit Decision and Approve Avoidance and Minimization

## **WHAT IS BOTTLENECK PROJECT STREAMLINING?**

Bottleneck project streamlining involves collaborative decision making to advance a critically needed transportation improvement as quickly as possible. Streamlining decision making identifies the decisions required to move a bottleneck project concept from the planning phase step "Approve Transportation Deficiencies", prior to completion of the long range plan, directly into the environmental review process. This approach combines the required elements of long range planning and environmental review while engaging the necessary decision makers to ensure that the final solution is supported and eligible to move forward to construction. Understanding how to expedite bottleneck projects effectively and efficiently, by minimizing risks, maintaining partner collaboration and robust stakeholder involvement, is critical to addressing urgently needed transportation improvements.

## **BENEFITS AND ENABLERS**

The primary benefit to be achieved through the streamlining process is the ability to provide needed transportation improvements in the shortest time possible; resulting in an overall cost savings, more efficient use of personnel, and project specific benefits such as improved safety or decreased congestion. In addition, the long term relationships among the decision makers are improved through a successful project outcome based on increased collaboration. A sense of trust can be established between the lead agency, the community, and both formal and informal partners. While engaged in the streamlining process, the other phases of transportation decision making can continue uninterrupted to meet goals and deadlines. For example, the Long Range Transportation Plan staff will continue to focus on the update of the plan by the required deadline while maintaining sufficient interface with the expedited project to ensure that the recommended alternative from the environmental review supports the regional system.

The potential to realize these benefits is enhanced when decision makers incorporate process and relationship supports (or enablers) .One of the essential enablers is the development of a common understanding of the overall need and the urgency for completing planning for the bottleneck improvement. This shared goal enables the entire team, representing the full partnership, to maintain focus as the environmental review process is conducted. Ensuring that all of the partnership project team members have the responsibility and the authority to participate in timely decision making is another important enabler for a streamlined bottleneck project. Finally, an up-front discussion of the potential availability and timing of funding to implement the project when environmental review is completed will help establish expectations among partners and stakeholders.

## **THRESHOLD CRITERIA**

Successfully implementing streamlining requires that the agency first meet certain underlying criteria to ensure that it is a good candidate for the approach. Explicit discussion of these threshold criteria with the full partnership will help identify potential risks associated with the decision to streamline a bottleneck project. Consider the following questions:

- When identifying transportation deficiencies in the planning process, is there sufficient information to justify that the potential project is a critical urgent transportation need?
- Is there agreement among all the formal decision makers - FHWA/FTA, the MPO, the State DOT, and relevant Resource Agencies - that this critical transportation need should be expedited?
- Do the formal decision makers have a strong working relationship that will ensure collaboration and commitment to a coordinated long range planning with environmental review/permitting?
- Does the affected local community support expediting this project?
- Can support from important stakeholders be reasonably assured?
- Is there full funding available to conduct the environmental review/permitting phase of the project?
- Is there a reasonable expectation that funds to construct the project will be available when environmental review/permitting is completed?

Responses to the threshold criteria questions will help determine the degree to which the agency is currently prepared to enter a streamlined process. However, if the threshold criteria cannot be achieved in the current situation, consideration of the benefits and enablers as well as risks and risk management may provide a means to meet the threshold criteria. Careful consideration of risks is essential before time and resources are committed to the actions required.

## **RISKS AND RISK MANAGEMENT**

The greatest risk for the streamlining process is that important reviews or inputs, including coordination between on-going long range planning and environmental review, will be overlooked or short changed in the desire to quickly complete the project. For example, if long range planning and environmental review are not coordinated after the decision is made to streamline a bottleneck project, there is a risk that the streamlined solution from NEPA will not be included in the adopted LRP and eligible to be funded in the TIP. This could result in substantial rework in LRP and potential risk to other priorities as adjustments are made to incorporate the project while still maintaining requirements for air quality conformity and fiscal constraint. Other risks are related to the roles of the individual agencies. If agency representatives do not have sufficient decision making authority, full buy-in of decision making partners is compromised. This situation may result in the need to reconsider decisions or make changes; resulting in project delay. In addition, the partnership's commitment to shared goals is essential to project streamlining. Once the decision is made to advance a bottleneck the speed and efficiency of streamlining is dependent on the on-going commitment of the partners to both the urgent need and the general project concept that should be considered.

Some risk management techniques to safeguard the streamlining process are:

- Development of reasonable schedules at the beginning of the process which are continually updated
- Development of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between partners to establish the expectations for collaboration and to ensure all interests are met
- Robust public participation throughout the process to ensure the public has input into and is informed about decisions that are made
- On-going involvement of important stakeholders, especially those considered potentially adversarial to the project or recommended solution.
- Identification of funding resources that will support the solution and/or identification of funding shortfalls early in the process.