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## Environment NEPA Regulatory Framework and Process The Social Environment

[www.fhwa.dot.gov/federal-aidessentials](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/federal-aidessentials)

*Evaluating your project's impacts on the social environment, people and communities is an important consideration in Federal-aid project delivery*



The National Environmental Policy Act, also known as NEPA, is an environmental law that established the decision-making process agencies must follow prior to the design and construction of transportation projects that use Federal funding or require Federal approval.

Following the right process or class of action is vital to properly completing the NEPA process. The significance of your project's impacts on the human and natural environment, not the project's size or cost, determines the project's appropriate class of action – whether you are going to do a categorical exclusion, (a “CE”), an environmental assessment, (an “EA”), or an environmental impact statement, (an “EIS”).

The NEPA process also provides a coordinated approach for evaluating the social, economic, and environmental impacts of your proposed project. This is often referred to as working under the NEPA umbrella.



### So, what is a "social environmental impact?"

It is simply any change the community defines as important and unique to its quality of life. That might include the displacement of homes or businesses, community cohesion, mobility, safety, noise, or air quality impacts.

When assessing social impacts, you must give particular attention to any low-income or minority populations because transportation and other types of infrastructure projects have historically tended to have more impacts on these groups.

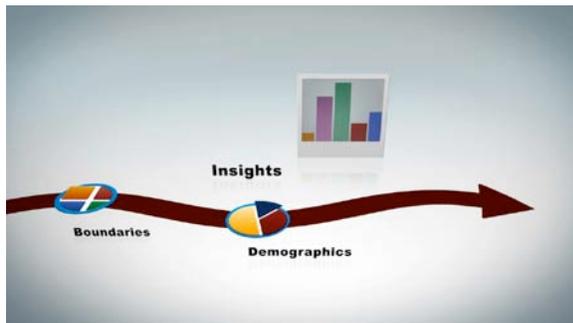


So, how should we address social environmental impacts while creating transportation solutions that communities will support?

Let's look at a community impact assessment, an approach for developing a picture of your affected community, working with them to lessen the impacts of your project and documenting your efforts.

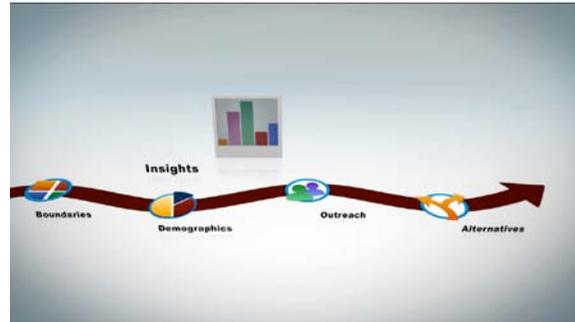
When developing a picture of your affected community, start by defining the community's boundaries. Use local knowledge and input from the community to help define the study area.

Next, gather demographic data and community characteristics about the people within these boundaries. For example, what are their income level, age distribution, ethnicity, and English proficiency? Do they rely on transit or public housing assistance? Where are the recreational areas, schools, places of worship, and social services? This snapshot will help you identify the affected populations and give you insights to possible outreach methods so you can open up a dialog with them about your project.



As you perform your research, remember that members of the affected community are your best source of information in understanding your project's potential impacts.

As you learn more about community concerns, you should evaluate alternatives that could lessen the social impacts. The inclusion of pedestrian trails, street lighting, landscaping, and even the rehabilitation of housing units are examples of possible mitigation to consider.



We have just reviewed the key components of a community impact assessment.

Now, let's see these steps in practice.

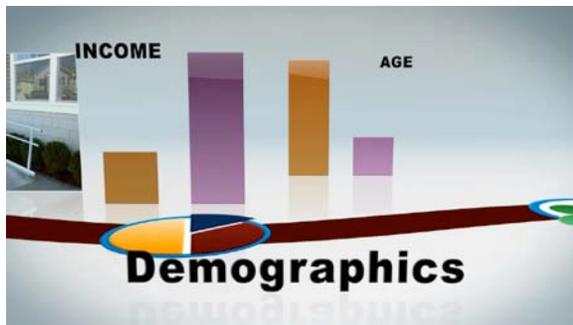
In our example, a one-mile stretch of city street will be widened to add a center turn lane to decrease congestion.

The study area includes businesses and houses adjacent to the street and the surrounding neighborhood. One of the potential displacements is a five-bedroom assisted-living home for the elderly.

The project team begins by reviewing census data. The data show that residents in the area are older and have a lower average household income compared with the rest of the city.

The project team interviews the manager and the residents of the assisted-living home. The team learns that residents of the group home routinely walk to the community center for exercise and other daily activities. The team also learns that many caregivers and family members live in the community and either walk or take the bus when visiting family in the assisted-living home. The residents and their families express concern about being separated from each other and the harm it would have on their caretaking relationships.

In order to gather more information, the project team hosts an open house at the community center. Many of the area seniors attend the meeting and express concerns about the relocations. They also express concern over their inability to safely cross the streets because of traffic.



After hearing all the concerns, the project team re-examines the study area for options that would avoid relocating the assisted-living home. They explore shifting the road widening to impact a fast food restaurant instead of the assisted-living home.

After further studying the project area, the project team determined that the restaurant could be relocated to a commercially zoned vacant lot one block away. The project plans were also revised to install new sidewalks and pedestrian crossing signals at all affected intersections.

The revised plans are shared with area residents and the project team receives positive feedback. Residents are pleased the project now includes new sidewalks and will be safer for them to cross the street.

Throughout the project, the project manager has kept a record of the public involvement activities and actions taken to address the communities' concerns. This information is included in the social environment chapter of the NEPA document to support the decision to revise the project plans.



As we have seen, all actions—including public involvement efforts—are documented. This documentation shows that you are conducting community outreach and that community input is being considered in project decision making.

For more information on social environmental impacts, consult the environmental toolkit on the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Web site. This valuable resource contains orientation materials, case studies, information related to low-income and minority populations, and other helpful tips for evaluating social impacts and conducting community impact assessments.

Your state department of transportation and FHWA division office can also provide guidance and help you develop approaches to evaluate and address your project's social impacts.

### Web Resources

- Link to FHWA's Office of Planning, Environment, and Realty Web site  
<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/index.htm>
- Link to FHWA's environmental justice Web site  
[http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/environmental\\_justice/](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/environmental_justice/)
- Link to FHWA's community impact assessment Web site  
[http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/community\\_impact\\_assessment/index.cfm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/community_impact_assessment/index.cfm)
- Information and guidance on community impact assessments  
<http://www.ciatrans.net/>

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This companion resource is the script content for the video production of the same name.