



New Hampshire Transportation Business Plan

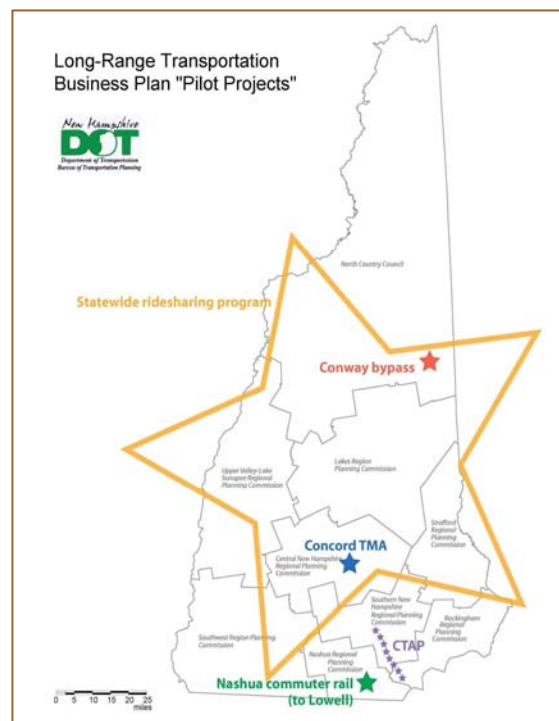


Citizen Advisory Committee to the New Hampshire Department of Transportation

In the fall of 2004, the New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) convened a citizen advisory committee (CAC) to develop a strategic plan for transportation investment and management as a part of the State long-range transportation plan (LRTP) process. Rather than the traditional scenario of the State DOT developing the policy framework for the LRTP and accepting public input on the issues, the NHDOT turned over the visioning process and development of the problem statement to the CAC. Thus, the “New Hampshire Transportation Business Plan” is the first citizen-generated strategic plan for a State’s long-term transportation goals and priorities. The evaluation measures that will be used to evaluate current and system performance and the performance of various combinations of future system improvements will be based on the factors that were identified as important to the public during the development of the “Transportation Business Plan.” This technical analysis will be added to the “Transportation Business Plan,” together comprising the State’s LRTP.

One of the principles of context sensitive solutions (CSS) is that stakeholders should be involved in the decision-making process in a genuine, open, and honest way. In developing the “Transportation Business Plan,” NHDOT went far beyond simply listening to and documenting the public’s concerns; NHDOT charged the CAC with the task of policy development. The resulting document lays out the tensions and tradeoffs inherent in making transportation choices in a clear manner, utterly free from transportation jargon. This outcome reflects the most important challenge faced by the NHDOT and the CAC during the LRTP process: effective communication. Additionally, by utilizing representatives of charitable and advocacy groups in the CAC, NHDOT was able to take advantage of the connections these organizations already had in communities across the State, thus broadening the base of stakeholders who became involved in the process. Yet, to convince these individuals and organizations to participate, NHDOT had to convince them that transportation planning issues were important to them and to their respective constituencies. The “New Hampshire Transportation Business Plan” and the process through which it was generated offer the opportunity to investigate several crucial aspects of public involvement and outreach:

- How can the planning process encourage clear and continuous communication with stakeholders?
- What are the advantages of partnering with organizations in developing a transportation plan?
- How can a problem statement be developed through collaboration?
- How can the ideas and perspectives of stakeholders be translated into innovative, long-range strategies?
- How can the adoption of CSS be integrated into transportation planning recommendations?



Map source: “Long-Range Transportation Business Plan,” courtesy of NHDOT





The Planning Context

New Hampshire is home to some 1.2 million persons, a population somewhat older than the national average (39 years compared to 35), and is projected to continue along an overall aging trend. Additionally, the 25 percent of residents who do not drive is also expected to increase, representing a growing group that will require special attention to ensure they can access needed services and not become socially isolated.

Most of the State's population growth is expected to be concentrated in the "southern tier," the counties in the south and especially the southeast. New Hampshire is seeing an increasing number of Interstate commuters; the plan reports that 82,000 residents work in Massachusetts, and 23,500 Massachusetts residents commute to jobs located in New Hampshire (2000 figures). This group illustrates a trend towards longer commute distances that contribute to congestion on a regional scale.

In the northern counties, growth is expected to be slower, although this region has substantial numbers of vacation/second homes, and expects to see increasing development of this type in coming years. Although the northern region does not generally experience congestion issues, heavy seasonal variation in visitors, especially during the autumn, creates unique problems for transportation system management. Additionally, maintaining the condition of existing roads and bridges along the New Hampshire-Vermont border are important factors in promoting and sustaining the northern region's economic development.

"Transportation is not an end in itself; its purpose is to serve common community aspirations for a better quality of life. Unfortunately, transportation is increasingly becoming a threat to quality of life in New Hampshire, not its handmaiden. Unless forceful action is taken now to reverse this trend, our quality of life will deteriorate. This is particularly true with respect to three of our greatest community assets: our small town character, the prosperity of our growing small cities, and the beauty of our great outdoors."

"New Hampshire Transportation Business Plan"

Overall, the plan expresses concern over land use and current development patterns. In many parts of the State, development threatens to damage or eliminate iconic New England land- and townscapes valued by residents and visitors. Farmlands and open space face increasing fragmentation, posing difficulties for maintaining viable family farms and sustaining natural habitat areas. Residents and organizations had been concerned about these changes, and the related effects on quality of life. For NHDOT, the key to engaging stakeholders in the transportation planning process was to convince them of the link between transportation and these other issues, and of how resolving transportation issues could be a catalyst for broader change.

Carol Murray, NHDOT commissioner, spearheaded the effort to put the CAC in the "driver's seat." Among NHDOT's goals for the process was to use the planning process to further the NHDOT transition to a "new transportation environment in which we must consistently apply best business practice to the delivery of our services to our core customer—the citizens." The 24-member CAC proved to be an active and deeply committed group that raised awareness

of transportation issues within their own organizations and among the general public. CAC members also learned a great deal about the transportation decision-making process and the value of partnering with the NHDOT. The resulting plan documents the initial discussion, which is intended to lay a foundation for a statewide conversation about transportation, growth, land use, and the future of the state of New Hampshire.





CSS Principles Applied

- **Communication is Open, Honest, Early, and Continuous:** When the CAC was organized, one of the explicit goals was that the CAC would contribute towards NHDOT's strategic goal of developing a "culture of respectful communication." However, the CAC and NHDOT quickly realized that simply initiating contact and discussion were not sufficient. At a very basic level, the two groups were unable to understand one another. One of the ways this communication gap was addressed was through an inreach committee. The inreach committee included DOT staff, regional planning commission members, and some CAC members. The original idea was that this group would deal with the more technical aspects of the process. In practice, the inreach committee served as a liaison between the DOT and the CAC.

"The first meetings were really tough. We realized that we spoke a different language, with lots of acronyms. It was really an eye opener. We needed to figure out how to communicate with people."

Carol Murray, NHDOT Commissioner

"Like any process that has been around a long time and has its own institutions, it has a language of its own . . . We need to think carefully about what we are doing by closing people out. Even the term CSS is completely opaque. It's only useful in DOT terms—it's about projects and engineering."

Lew Feldstein, Chair CAC

Aside from working with NHDOT staff, the CAC was heavily involved in the outreach to the general public. The CAC developed much of the material that was presented to the public, and hosted approximately 20 public meetings. This brought out a different sector of the general population, than had past NHDOT-hosted outreach activities. As a result, the input gathered at those meetings came from a broader cross section of the population, increasing its validity and completeness. This arrangement also meant that the group charged with developing the plan directly heard the perspectives of the community, improving the flow of information and ideas, and helping the CAC fully incorporate public input in its plan recommendations. A consultant was also engaged specifically to work with the CAC and to help ensure that the message conveyed to the public was well developed and on point.

The plan document offers evidence of the "culture of respectful communication" in its inclusion of dissenting views among CAC members. These views were not ignored or eliminated through majority rule. Instead, dissenting views are presented as a part of the plan, not relegated to a subsidiary "minority report." This inclusion strengthens the document itself, providing evidence that the recommendations were thoroughly discussed in a truly open forum. Further, this approach will likely bring benefits in the future. When stakeholders know that their views, even if they are out of step with the majority, will be recognized, documented, and honored, they will be far more likely to participate in future planning efforts and more likely to approach those efforts with a collaborative mindset.

The plan also addresses the issue of communication in its recommendations for the statewide NHDOT policy. It calls for clarifying the language and information used in transportation decision making so that the process is more transparent and accessible. This clearly stems from the CAC members' own experience, many of whom were new to the process.

- **Identification of Problem Statement Derived from a Collaborative Process:** In addition to setting forth a vision, the "Transportation Business Plan" constitutes the problem statement for statewide transportation planning. The framing of the State's transportation needs was one of the charges given the CAC, and from the start, the CAC worked to understand the perspectives of the public. These perspectives were important factors shaping the recommendations and proposals in the plan.

The CAC itself was the result of a collaborative partnership between NHDOT and community organizations and advocacy groups. A wide range of perspectives were brought together on the CAC, including natural resource interests, transit agencies, community development organizations, State





and county political leaders, freight industry groups, public health promotion organizations, non-profit service groups, and DOT officials. Hearing such diverse voices, the CAC found that transportation issues could not be treated simplistically or in isolation, but rather noted that a broad discussion about growth, development, and quality of life is needed to effectively cope with transportation issues.

NHDOT found that simply extending an invitation to these organizations did not ensure their participation. In fact, it took some 18 months to convince Lew Feldstein to chair the CAC, as representative of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation (NHCF). He, in turn, had to convince the board of directors of the NHCF. In the end, the most convincing argument was that there are important links between land use and transportation. For the NHCF, which had long been looking for an appropriate and effective avenue to address community and quality of life issues, participating in the CAC offered an opportunity to do so through the transportation planning process.

“At the internal presentations, the slide that was most effective was the one that discussed quality of life and then quality of transportation, and we explained how we thought about the two together.”

Ansel Sanborn, NHDOT

Similarly, some NHDOT staff struggled to understand the reasoning behind turning to a citizen-driven, long-range planning process. Some also questioned the composition of the CAC. Up to that time, the agency had been adopting a CSS approach in project development, seeking to include all perspectives, generally by convening a hand-picked steering committee, although the agency had found that some perspectives were missed using this approach. The proposal to have a representative of a charitable grants organization head up the CAC, however, went far beyond previous practice and met with some internal resistance. DOT staff also questioned the value of including a representative of Easter Seals on the CAC, although she proved to be very supportive of the process, recognizing how important transportation issues are for her constituency, the elderly and disabled. As it had been for the CAC members and their organizations,

the most convincing point was that the LRTP process was going to look at the interaction between quality of life and quality of transportation, an interaction that was echoed in the structure of the process, by bringing groups not usually involved in transportation issues into the transportation decision-making process. Despite the initial resistance, NHDOT's outreach to such organizations proved very fruitful, and brought together a group of strong and committed advocates with considerable knowledge about community issues.

- **Evaluates Multi-modal, Operational, and Innovative Strategies:** Recommendations in the plan are organized by the policy level for which they are appropriate: town/city, region, or State, so that the ideas and vision behind the plan can be applied holistically. The goal is to better coordinate transportation planning and project development between various jurisdictions and levels of government (local, regional, State). Throughout the plan recommendations, the links between transportation and land use are emphasized.

The plan includes strong recommendations that NHDOT support transit system improvements and transit-oriented development (TOD). One of the specific recommendations is a call for Interstate cooperation on transit and TOD plans. The plan also recommends that connectivity of local roads be improved to help keep traffic off State roads. This would also preserve the traditional street patterns of New Hampshire towns, or even repair street grids that have been disconnected. Partnering with the private sector to develop demand management programs or even employer-based and -funded transit service. Other recommendations were directed towards improving regional and State transportation planning, including better engaging the public, making the process more transparent with clearer language, and developing a statewide GIS database.

Another major recommendation is that NHDOT adopt policies that focus on maintaining and managing existing infrastructure. The plan recommends a “wellness” program that funds small projects, delivered in shorter time frames to maintain the overall health of the State system, with the goal of heading off the need for big projects with very long time frames and high costs. At the regional level, recommendations include corridor management plans that include agreements between various agencies and jurisdictions.

An additional innovative recommendation is for changes in the performance measures used for evaluating projects or system performance. The plan suggests moving away from a focus on vehicle speed and capacity toward more “people-oriented measures,” including travel-time reliability,





increased choices, and lower travel costs for households. This recommendation could have a profound effect on how transportation decisions are made. By reframing transportation purposes and needs, it may reconcile transportation with other quality-of-life elements valued by New Hampshire residents.

- **Based on Adopted CSS Policy:** NHDOT has made substantial investment in CSS training for staff and implementing CSS in project development. Yet, project managers faced difficulties in applying CSS principles at the project level because the LRTP from which they were working was not well coordinated with a CSS approach. By taking a CSS-driven approach to the LRTP process, NHDOT hopes to develop an LRTP that will coordinate better with a CSS-driven project development process, with the goal of consistently focusing on customers in all DOT activities.

In keeping with this, the “Transportation Business Plan” includes the recommendation that CSS be adopted as State policy. The CAC called CSS “common sense solutions,” language they felt would be more understandable to those outside NHDOT. More specifically, the plan calls for NHDOT to allow flexibility in highway design and design speeds so that project design can be more responsive to context. This idea is bringing a positive response from NHDOT engineers, who view this as an opportunity to do “real engineering work” instead of cookie-cutter applications of standards.

Lessons Learned

The “New Hampshire Transportation Business Plan” highlights the critical importance of carefully attending to the quality of communication in the planning process. The transportation industry is known for the extensive use of acronyms and technical lingo, a situation that stems from its roots in engineering. However, if transportation planning agencies want to develop plans that fit with the needs, preferences, and vision of communities, the issues must be clearly conveyed. Planning agencies should be flexible in developing public outreach materials and processes so that genuine public participation and input is not blocked or distorted because of language issues. Clearly, an attitude that public involvement is something to be “gotten through” must be eliminated in order to integrate CSS into transportation planning.

Using consultants to help develop the plan and facilitate the process is a common practice and can be very efficient and productive. However, the relationships between the consultant, the DOT and the CAC must be clearly defined. The CAC found it very helpful to have a consultant dedicated to assisting them with their work. This gave the group confidence when recommending something new for New Hampshire, as this consultant brought up-to-date information on innovative practices from across the Nation to the discussion. On the other hand, members of the CAC expressed some frustration with disconnects between their work and some of the work done by a second consultant for whom the NHDOT was the primary client. One possible way to remedy this situation would be to include the CAC in the selection of all consultants, and to have all relationships between the various entities clearly defined from the start.

Challenges Ahead

Implementation of the “Transportation Business Plan” recommendations will be a challenge. Since the point of departure for the entire LRTP process was the land use-transportation connection, many of its recommendations call for greater planning coordination and planning capacity building. This means, of course, that many of the plan recommendations actually fall outside the control of NHDOT, although the plan is careful to point out where NHDOT can be instrumental in influencing outside agencies and processes. NHDOT will be responding to the CAC plan recommendations with specific responses, the first step towards implementation of the plan.





An important part of plan implementation lies in ensuring that the discussions and engagement that came out of the planning process are carried forward. The investment that NHDOT made in the transportation planning process will no doubt encourage the continuity of public engagement on transportation issues. NHDOT is already seeing benefits from the partnerships that formed during the process, especially with respect to the community technical assistance program. Still, the approach was very new, and involved a relatively small number of highly committed individuals. In order to fully implement and sustain this innovative, citizen-driven planning process, NHDOT will need to embrace the ideas of CSS as an institutional policy rather than relying on a handful of individuals in the organization to ensure its continuity. The LRTP staff at NHDOT will need to continue to work with stakeholders within the DOT and to cultivate a high level of commitment to accomplish this.

In Closing

The “New Hampshire Transportation Business Plan” offers an example of an innovative approach to long-range transportation planning. The plan is a first in the Nation for turning over development of long-term transportation policy to a citizen advisory group. The level of commitment to this idea and the process of involving the CAC are commendable. Despite the difficulties and uncertainties of the process, the participants felt it was well worth doing. Asked if such a process is repeatable in other places, Murray stated, “Not only is it repeatable, but it *should* be done.”

The plan also provides an excellent example of how to broaden and deepen public engagement, and of how a planning effort that is deeply committed to improving not only quality of transportation, but also quality of life, can produce rich insights and a breadth of plan recommendations that promise tremendous payoffs.

“One of the questions we always got at the public meetings was ‘What will you do with this? Where is it going?’”

Ansel Sanborn, NHDOT Planning Administrator

“This is certainly not useful if it’s a one-time thing . . . We need the DOT involvement. They must be interested in continuing to engage with us. We need to constantly remind DOT that they need us and that we’re interested.”

Lew Feldstein, Chair CAC

“The key is getting the conversation going. Now we have to keep it going.”

Carol Murray, NHDOT Commissioner

For More Information:

- [NH DOT website](http://www.nh.gov/dot/index.htm): www.nh.gov/dot/index.htm
- [NH DOT Transportation Business Plan website](http://www.nhtranplan.com): www.nhtranplan.com
- [NH Charitable Foundation website](http://www.nhcf.org): www.nhcf.org
- [FHWA CSS website](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/csd/index.cfm): www.fhwa.dot.gov/csd/index.cfm
- [AASHTO CSS website](http://environment.transportation.org/environmental_issues/context_sens_sol/): http://environment.transportation.org/environmental_issues/context_sens_sol/
- [Online Resource Center for CSS](http://www.contextsensitivesolutions.org): www.contextsensitivesolutions.org

