

PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL LINKAGES PROCESS FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY



CA0602
Interstate 530 – Highway 67

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Arkansas State Highway &
Transportation Department



Proposed PEL Process Framework and Methodology for CA0602

In the spirit of cooperation and collaboration, and acknowledging the critical role that a number of agencies play in achieving the transportation goals of the State of Arkansas, the central Arkansas metropolitan area and the cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock, this Framework and Methodology Agreement has been developed to foster proactive working relationships among the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department (AHTD), Metroplan (the Metropolitan Planning Organization for central Arkansas) and the local governments of Little Rock, North Little Rock and Pulaski County. The FHWA, in conjunction with the AHTD, are the lead agencies and Metroplan and the local governments are project partners. The cooperation among the lead agencies and project partners will be integral to the success of a collaborative environmental and transportation planning process.

The purpose of the Framework and Methodology is to encourage the use of a Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) process to meet agency needs while expediting transportation project delivery and to formalize the scope, schedule and expectations for the Connecting Arkansas Program (CAP) CA0602 project. This Framework and Methodology is meant to foster a united process that supports:

- Early communication, coordination, and collaboration with and input by other local, state and federal agencies in the transportation planning process;
- Better informed and strategic transportation decisions; and
- Efficient and cost-effective solutions.

Early communication and collaboration among all interested parties is essential to the success of future planning, informing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, and identifying issues.

Purpose

To conduct analysis and planning activities with resource agencies and the public in order to produce transportation planning products that effectively serve the community's transportation needs. By using the PEL process, more effective environmental stewardship and decisions should result and will be used to inform a subsequent project-specific NEPA process.

Study Area

The proposed PEL study area has been delineated as depicted in **Figure 1** below. It is approximately 6.7 miles in length and extends through portions of Little Rock and North Little Rock in central Arkansas. The proposed study area includes a 0.25 mile buffer extending from the centerline of I-30 from I-530 to the south and I-40 to the north, and along I-40 to its interchange with I-67 in North Little Rock. This corridor was previously assessed and recommended as an alternative for further study as part of *Phase 1 Arkansas River Crossing Study*, completed in 2003. This study analyzed travel through central Arkansas and across the Arkansas River. This study area also corresponds with the voter-endorsed improvements to I-30, a project that was included as part of the constitutional amendment passed during the November 2012 election for a 10-year, half-cent sales tax to improve highway and infrastructure throughout the state of

Arkansas. I-30 not only provides access from the downtown areas of Little Rock and North Little Rock, but also supports traffic traveling to and from origins and destinations outside of the immediate metropolitan area. The proposed project study area will be developed by AHTD for FHWA review and will be presented at future Technical Work Group meetings for comment.

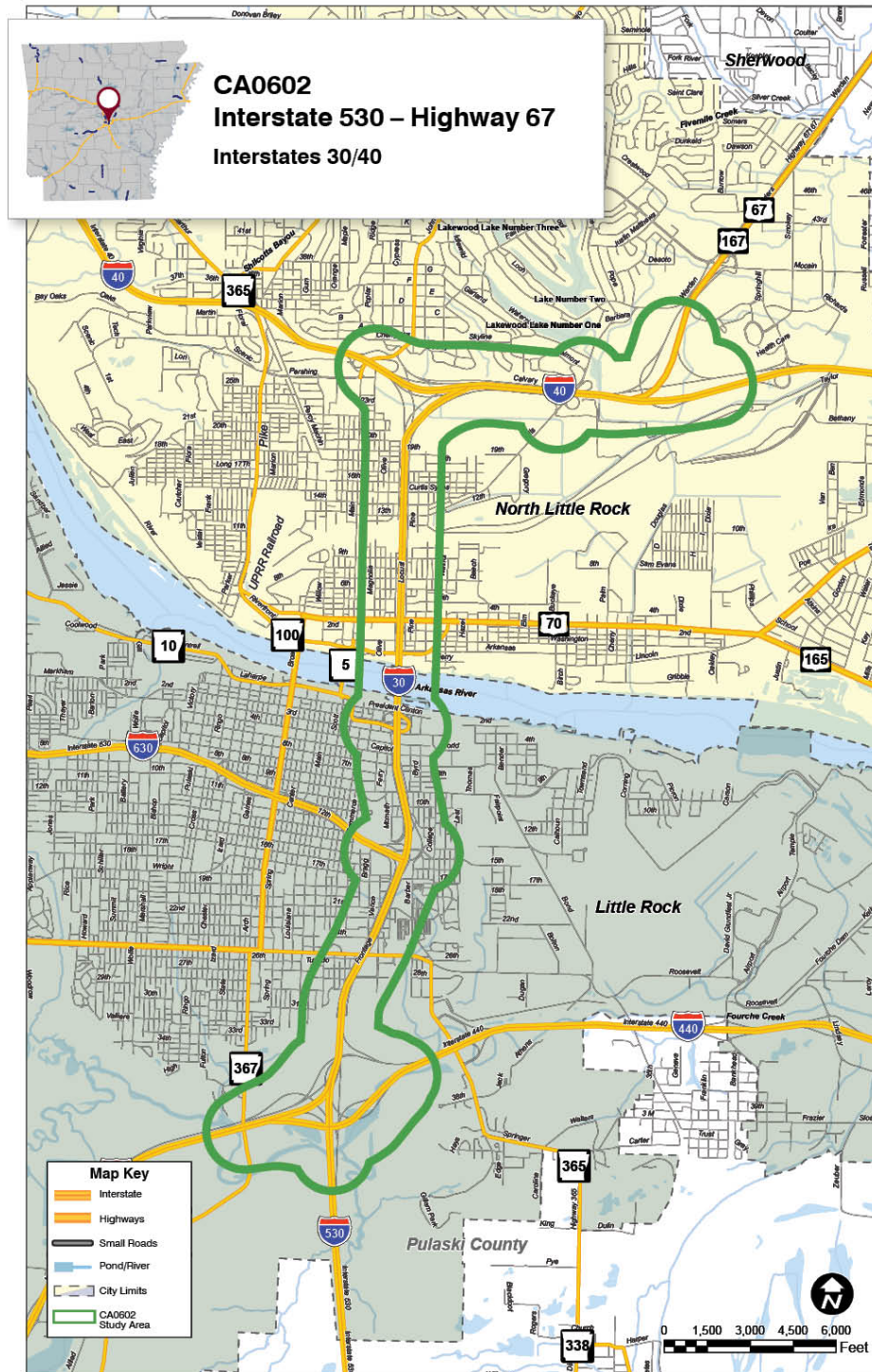


Figure 1: Proposed PEL Study Area

PEL Process Framework

Linking planning and NEPA is the purpose of the PEL process and will be followed in order to minimize duplication of effort, promote environmental stewardship, and reduce delays in project implementation. The PEL process framework includes:

- Identifying the Transportation Need;
- Identifying Stakeholders;
- Defining Roles and Responsibilities;
- Defining and Refining the Travel Corridor (including logical termini);
- Developing Purpose, Need, Goals and Objectives;
- Developing Performance Measures;
- Developing Alternatives and Defining Modes of Travel;
- Evaluating and Screening Alternatives;
- Addressing Potential Funding Options and Staging Scenarios;
- Identifying Environmental Impacts, including Potential Mitigation Options/Priorities;
- Documenting the Evaluation Process; and
- Developing reports to document and finalize the PEL Study.

The PEL Study will be completed in accordance with the following legislation and regulatory guidance so that it can be used to inform the NEPA process:

- **The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU)** – This 2005 surface transportation funding and authorization bill included several provisions intended to enhance the consideration of environmental issues and impacts within the transportation planning process and encourage the use of the products from planning in the NEPA process. Specifically, Section 6001, *Environmental Considerations in Planning*, requires certain elements and activities to be included in the development of long-range transportation plans, including:
 - Consultations with resource agencies, such as those responsible for land-use management, natural resources, environmental protection, conservation and historic preservation, which shall involve, as appropriate, comparisons of resource maps and inventories;
 - Discussion of potential environmental mitigation activities;
 - Participation plans that identify a process for stakeholder involvement; and
 - Visualization of proposed transportation strategies where practicable.
- **23 CFR 450.212 and 23 CFR 450.318** – In 2007, FHWA issued new planning regulations that eliminated the requirement for a major investment study and implemented provisions enacted by SAFETEA-LU. In its place, the regulations created a new optional procedure for linking transportation planning and NEPA studies. These procedures are contained in 23 CFR 450.212 (statewide planning) and 23 CFR 450.318 (metropolitan planning).

- **Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21)** – This 2012 funding bill promotes accelerating project delivery and encourages innovation through the increased use of programmatic approaches and planning and environment linkages.

With a view towards achieving consistency with local and regional planning efforts, it is anticipated that the PEL process and its subsequent recommendations will determine refinements to the next long-range Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), developed by Metroplan, and the CARTS Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). Additionally, it is anticipated that the PEL process will follow in accordance with the CARTS Agreement of Understanding between Metroplan and the local jurisdictions and transit authorities.

In order to meet the above requirements, the PEL process will be NEPA-like and include the following components:

- Coordination with local, state, tribal, and federal agencies;
- Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS);
- Public review of the PEL Study, including opportunity for public/agency involvement;
- Documentation of relevant decisions in a format that is identifiable and available for review during the NEPA scoping process so that it can be appended or referenced in the NEPA document; and
- Adherence to and completion of the *Planning/Environmental Linkages Questionnaire* that will be included in the PEL Study.

Additionally, the FHWA direction provided in the *Guidance on Using Corridor and Subarea Planning to Inform NEPA* (April 2011) and AHTD's *Preliminary Environmental Review* (PER) will be consulted to support the study approach.

The PEL process is part of the FHWA *Every Day Counts* (EDC) Initiative intended to identify and deploy innovation aimed at shortening project delivery. The EDC PEL initiative is included in the first group of innovations identified by FHWA in 2010 (EDC-1) and encourages the use of information developed in planning to inform the NEPA process. FHWA's newest set of innovations, EDC-2 (launched in 2012), includes the Implementing Quality Environmental Documents (IQED) initiative. IDEQ best practices such as preparing effective summaries and technical reports, effective visualization and presentation of data to the public, and developing a specific purpose and need that supports the alternatives screening process in selecting the alternatives for further evaluation will be implemented as part of this PEL Study.

Methodology

The Study Team (AHTD and Consultants) will follow the processes outlined below in accordance with the defined framework. The results of the PEL process will be documented as described below and will follow the timelines shown in the PEL Study Process/Product Flow Chart (attached).

Study Team/Lead Agency/Project Partner PEL Process Coordination

The Study Team will meet with AHTD to review the proposed PEL process framework, methodology, planning products, review cycles, and the schedule to receive feedback/approval. Following input from AHTD, the Study Team will meet with FHWA to determine if the proposed PEL process would satisfy the thresholds established above.

Once determined by FHWA that the PEL process framework meets the requirements of the listed components so that the information, analysis and transportation planning products generated can be incorporated into the NEPA process, the Study Team will begin public involvement efforts with elected officials, agencies and the public.

The Study Team will coordinate with AHTD and FHWA as required throughout the PEL process to coordinate reviews and obtain input on the development of the PEL Study. The list of local, state, federal, and tribal agencies to be coordinated with, as well as coordination responsibilities, will be determined in conjunction with the AHTD and FHWA as part of the Public Involvement and Agency Coordination Plan (PIACP) that will be developed by the Study Team. Ongoing coordination with Metroplan will occur as well to incorporate the PEL Study recommendations as part of Metropolitan Transportation Plan updates.

Public Involvement/Agency Coordination

The Study Team will prepare a PIACP as a roadmap for addressing how affected or interested members of the public; study area property owners; and project stakeholders, including federal, state, tribal and local agency and public officials would be included as part of the PEL process. Public involvement efforts will be completed in accordance with the most current versions of AHTD's Public Involvement Handbook and supported by the CARTS Public Participation Plan.

Outreach efforts will include:

- 1) A Technical Work Group (TWG) will be created and serve as the primary means of agency coordination for the PEL Study. The TWG will include local, state, federal and tribal staff to provide technical input and expertise throughout the study. The TWG will be called upon to meet prior to the open house/public meetings. TWG meetings may also include representatives from local businesses, environmental advocacy groups and representatives from major regional institutions. Letters will be prepared and sent inviting local, state, tribal and federal agency participation and seeking feedback throughout the PEL process.
- 2) Project Partner Meetings (PPMs) will be scheduled and occur in advance of each TWG to review planning documents and other materials and information prepared by the Study Team.

- 3) A Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG), comprised of local individuals who bring unique knowledge and skills complementing those of the TWG, will be established in order to ensure early and ongoing decision making throughout the study. The SAG's role is to make recommendations and/or provide key information and materials to the Study Team. The SAG will include twelve representatives, with the Mayors of Little Rock and North Little Rock each appointing four, as well as four selected by the Pulaski County Judge. SAG members provide a one-of-a-kind perspective to the areas of interest each represents within the community, allowing the Study Team to gather valuable input. The SAG will meet regularly throughout the PEL process.
- 4) Open House/Public Meeting(s) will be held in conjunction with key project goals such as the development of the purpose and need and transportation goals and objectives. The Open House/Public meetings will also be utilized to obtain input and feedback on the alternatives analysis methodology and development of alternatives. In order to follow a NEPA-like process, the Study Team will follow the AHTD Public Involvement Handbook (Draft Version - 2013) and the CAP Environmental Manual (2013) for all Public Meetings.
- 5) A study-specific page will be created on the www.connectingarkansasprogram.com website to communicate project information and public involvement activities throughout the PEL process. The CAP project email address and phone number will be listed on the website and all outreach materials.
- 6) Other outreach tools and events such as newsletters and agency coordination meetings/briefings will be prepared and conducted throughout the duration of the PEL Study.
- 7) Visioning Workshops will be conducted to obtain early feedback and develop a foundation for continued community outreach. One visioning workshop will be conducted with stakeholders during the PEL process, and another visioning workshop will be held during the NEPA/Schematic phase. During the first visioning workshop, and with an understanding of the purpose and need and goals and objectives of the PEL Study, stakeholders will have the opportunity to incorporate their ideas and priorities for the I-30 corridor. From this visioning workshop, renderings of possible solutions that preserve and enhance aesthetic, historic and community resources will be developed. During the NEPA/Schematic phase, a second visioning workshop will be held with stakeholders that examines potential context sensitive solutions (CSS) and design concepts in greater detail. Based on stakeholder feedback and available funding, CSS/aesthetic guidelines will be developed following this second visioning workshop and included in the design-build request for proposals, pending AHTD approval.

As the PEL Study progresses, the project partners will have the opportunity to review the following four PEL milestones: purpose and need, alternatives screening methodology, PEL recommendations, and final PEL report. All comments received from project partners at these milestones will be addressed and resolved, to the extent practicable, in a formal comment-resolution process. Any relevant issues identified during the PEL Study will be documented for potential inclusion in future NEPA studies, as applicable. As the goal of the PEL approach is to reduce project delivery times and improve environmental outcomes, efforts will be made to resolve any project partner concerns during the course of the PEL process so that decisions made during the PEL Study can be incorporated by reference during NEPA with minimal duplication of effort. Consistent with FHWA's authority under NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508 and 23 CFR 771) and FHWA's planning regulations (23 CFR 450), final decisions regarding the inclusion of any planning products, decisions or coordination activities that occur during the PEL Study and their applicability towards future NEPA studies will be made solely by the lead federal agency(ies) at the initiation of the NEPA studies.

Additionally, agency input on key milestones will be received through the TWG, and public and stakeholder input will be solicited through public meetings and outreach. All meetings will be documented accordingly, and similar to comments from the project partners, agency, stakeholder and public comments received will undergo a comment-resolution and response process where comments are addressed and resolved to the extent practicable.

Public Involvement Planning Products:

- Public Involvement and Agency Coordination Plan
- Mailing Lists
- Website/Project e-mail address/phone number
- Agency Coordination Letters
- Public Notices for Public Meetings
- News Releases for Public Meetings
- Public Meeting Summaries
- Technical Work Group Meeting Summaries
- CSS Workshop Summary
- Public Involvement and Agency Coordination Report (for inclusion in the PEL Study)

PEL Study

The Study Team has proposed the planning products and approaches below in accordance with the planning thresholds and regulations previously listed. The planning products listed below would also address the questions posed by FHWA's *Planning/Environmental Linkages Questionnaire*, which is encouraged to be a guide throughout the PEL process.

Review of Previous Project History

- Evaluate use of goals and objectives, purpose and need, and alternatives of previous studies as a foundation for the PEL Study.
- Evaluate current or near future planning studies or projects in the vicinity of the PEL study area and the relationship of this PEL study to those studies/projects
 - Planning Product: Previous Project History Summary Report

Purpose and Need/Transportation Goals and Objectives

- Describe the scope of the PEL study and the reason for completing it. Will also provide the purpose and need statement, and the transportation goals and objectives to realize the expected corridor vision. The FHWA *Every Day Counts* 2012 Initiative (EDC-2) for Implementing Quality Environmental Documentation will be utilized when developing the purpose and need. Following the SMART Technique, the purpose and need will be **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ctionable, **R**ealistic, and **T**ime-Related. In doing so, the purpose and need will be unambiguous and provide an understandable and project specific detail for the PEL and future NEPA analysis.
 - Planning Product: Purpose and Need/Transportation Goals and Objectives Technical Report

Alternatives Evaluation Methodology

- Development of the performance measures, fatal flaw analysis criteria, alternative evaluation screening criteria and mode selection analysis based on qualitative and quantitative measures.
- The alternative evaluation screening process will include criteria that measure the effectiveness of addressing issues identified in the purpose and need (e.g., congestion, safety) as well as other engineering, environmental, cost, and stakeholder input. Having a specific, well-defined purpose and need, as developed using the SMART Technique described above, supports the alternative screening process in identifying the alternatives for further evaluation.
- Review of the travel demand model to develop design criteria and typical sections.
 - Planning Product: Alternatives Evaluation Methodology Technical Report

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

- Collect data (includes a high-level constraints mapping analysis using ArcGIS), field reconnaissance, discussion of existing environment and analyses of potential impacts.
- Additionally, permitting/mitigation options would be considered and potential indirect and cumulative impacts analyses may be described and analyzed.

- Planning Products: Environmental Constraints Map; Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences Technical Report.

Alternatives Development and Evaluation

- Based on initial data collection efforts, project partners, TWG and previous stakeholder input, the Universe of Alternatives will be developed followed by a fatal flaw analysis (purpose and need) to assist in the screening process.
- After the Universe of Alternatives are developed and evaluated with the associated input, the First Screening of Alternatives would occur → Universe to Preliminary.
- After the Preliminary Alternatives are developed and evaluated with the associated input, the next phase would be the development and evaluation of the Reasonable Alternatives. This includes additional data collection/analysis, input from the TWG and other stakeholders, resulting in the Second Screening of Alternatives → Preliminary to Reasonable.
- After the Reasonable Alternatives are developed and evaluated with the associated input, the final phase would be the development and evaluation of the PEL recommendations. This includes additional data collection/analysis, input from the project partners, TWG and other stakeholders, resulting in the Final Screening of Alternatives → Reasonable to PEL recommendations.
- After input is received on the PEL recommendations, the development and evaluation of the Universe, Preliminary, and Reasonable Alternatives and PEL recommendations will be documented.
 - Planning Products: Alternatives Development and Evaluation Technical Report

PEL Study and PEL/NEPA Transition Technical Report

- The PEL Study would be a comprehensive transportation planning document that incorporates the Public Involvement and Agency Coordination Plan; Previous Project History Summary; Purpose and Need/Transportation Goals and Objectives Technical Report; Alternatives Evaluation Methodology Technical Report; Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences Technical Report; and Alternatives Development and Evaluation Methodology Technical Report. The PEL Study will also include a completed version of the FHWA *Planning/Environmental Linkages Questionnaire* as an Appendix.
- A PEL/NEPA Transition Technical Report would address:
 - Environmental Resources not reviewed in the PEL study and why and whether they would be reviewed in a NEPA study.
 - Mitigation issues/strategies to be analyzed during the NEPA process.
 - What should be accomplished during the NEPA process to make information from the PEL study available to agencies and the public.
 - What PEL study result or products will be carried forward to NEPA process.

- Any special issues or problems the Study Team should be aware of.
 - Planning Products: PEL Study and PEL/NEPA Transition Technical Report

Project Documentation

In accordance with PEL best practices, which suggest detailed documentation of project events, an “Issues Tracking Log” and a “Project History” will also be maintained.

Attachment

**CA0602-I-30 Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL)
Process/Product Flow Chart**

