

Chapter 1

OKI's Process for Local Environmental Consultations

As part of its transportation planning process, OKI conducted environmental consultations with local agencies in 2010-2011. Consultations are required to provide for a comparison of the transportation plan with environmental resources identified for state conservation or protection.

This document describes the process and environmental data that OKI developed to support that comparison and summarizes discussion with local agencies. Discussion focused on where and how local environmental resources may be adversely affected by the transportation plan and related development -- and how adverse effects might be avoided.

This first round of OKI consultations clarifies the transportation system's environmental effects and their financial implications. As a process that can result in better decisions for improving transportation, consultations are to be integrated into the development of each regional transportation plan update.

The Role of Consultations in Transportation Planning

Environmental consultations are a recent requirement for regional transportation planning. Metropolitan planning agencies like OKI are to consult with state and local conservation, environmental protection, and land use management agencies concerning the transportation plan's development. These consultations are to involve a comparison of the transportation plan with environmental resources (per 23 CFR Sec 450.322 [g]). This new process expands participation in the transportation plan's development and consideration of potential environmental effects and their financial implications.

The comparison that is central to the consultations serves to clarify how the transportation system and potential improvements contribute to environmental impacts or consequences that increase financial costs -- and how those impacts and related costs can be reduced. At a project level, improvements that avoid the need for environmental mitigation can result in lower costs. At a broader scale, the cumulative result of transportation improvements and related development on environmental resources is tied to public expenditures such as flood control, water treatment, stormwater management, and species recovery efforts. Planning provides opportunity to change conventional transportation and development trends and practices and reduce negative and costly environmental impacts.

The financial implications of increased mitigation and continued development trends are the basis for the federal requirement for consultations. Consultations are integrated into transportation planning as a strategy to advance sustainable development and environmental stewardship. Consultations are intended to result in better decisions for transportation planning that more fully account for environmental effects and their financial consequences.

As a new process for transportation planning, consultations provide opportunity for reducing environmental impacts that add costs, but they do not determine the outcome. The results of the consultations will depend on local understanding of the transportation plan's environmental effects and on subsequent decisions and initiatives. Progress in reducing public sector costs can be advanced by:

- transportation improvements that do not require mitigation,
- development that avoids impacts to Regionally-Significant Environmental Resources,
- development and stormwater management practices that reduce environmental impacts,
- local initiatives to more effectively conserve high-quality and scarce resources, and
- public policies and development processes that better account for environmental resource values.

Local Agency Participation

OKI consultations with local agencies involved seven sessions staggered over a six month period in 2010 and early 2011. The sessions were arranged as follows:

- four in Ohio (separate sessions for Butler, Clermont, Hamilton, and Warren Counties),
- two in Northern Kentucky (one for Boone, Campbell, and Kenton Counties combined and one with the major storm water management agency/ Sanitation District No. 1), and
- one in Indiana (Dearborn County).

The agencies invited to participate in the consultations are involved in conservation, land use planning, parks, storm water management, or water resources. OKI invited 44 agencies to participate in a consultations session. Those that were unable to participate were contacted after the session and provided with information from the meeting to facilitate their involvement in future consultations.

All together, 34 agencies and 39 individuals participated in the environmental consultations. Participants were mostly county level agencies but included some multi-county and Cincinnati agencies, as indicated by the following list of agency types:

- conservation (county Soil and Water Conservation Districts in Ohio and Indiana, county Conservation Districts in Kentucky, county Natural Resources Conservation Service),
- land use planning (county level),
- parks (county level and Cincinnati),
- storm water management (Sanitation District No. 1 of Northern Kentucky, county level agencies or offices in Ohio and Indiana, Cincinnati), and
- water resources (Clermont County Office of Environmental Quality, Historic Hoosier Hills Resource Conservation and Development, Miami Conservancy District, ORSANCO).

Meetings were scheduled to accommodate the largest number of participants available for one of several possible meeting dates. Appendix A lists the date of each session, the agencies and staff that participated, and the agencies contacted.

Consultations Discussion Framework

OKI developed a framework to guide discussion for all consultations sessions. In this framework, each session began with an explanation of the environmental resource information used for comparison with the transportation plan. The remainder of the session provided for the comparison, which was a discussion guided by three sets of questions for considering where and how environmental resources may be affected by the transportation plan and related development – and how adverse environmental impacts might be avoided.

The four major topics of discussion in the consultation sessions are listed below, along with key information used as a basis for discussion. Each of these topics is addressed more fully in the following report sections, which summarize the discussion by local agencies and details the discussion framework.

Regionally Significant Environmental Resources

Resources identified by the states for conservation or protection are referred to as Regionally Significant Environmental Resources in OKI's consultation process. Resources are classified in five categories: State-Conserved Area; Regionally Significant Streams; Scenic River; Wetlands; and Endangered Threatened, and Rare Species. In each consultations session, OKI described the categories, presented a map and tables that identified local resources within categories, and explained the state data sources used to identify them. Each presentation was modified to account for state differences in plans and policies and county-specific resources. Section 2 describes the environmental resources considered in the consultations and summarizes their review and discussion.

Recommended Transportation Improvements

The consultations include discussion of where environmental impacts may occur as a result of transportation improvements recommended for expanding highway capacity. This discussion is the geographic-based part of the comparison. Section 3 presents local agency comments on potential environmental impairments and benefits related to individual transportation projects and the overall plan.

Local Strategies for Addressing Major Environmental Concerns

Local agencies identified practices in place for protecting local environmental resources from major impacts of the transportation system and development projects. They clarified how local development, stormwater management, and conservation strategies work and do not work to protect local environmental resources, and they discussed the potential to strengthen existing strategies.

Section 3 presents discussion related to state agencies' concerns that

- forested tracts remain intact,
- stream corridors remain functional for wildlife movement,
- roadway runoff be diverted from direct entry into streams and highway projects avoid infringement on riparian zones,
- streams not already impaired be protected, and
- the growth of impervious surface be constrained.

Local Consideration of Strategies Suggested for Reducing Environmental Impacts

Local agencies discussed the feasibility of strengthening five strategies suggested by state agencies for their potential to reduce adverse environmental impacts. Section 4 presents discussion of obstacles and opportunities for protecting environmental resources more effectively through local use of

- low-impact development and green infrastructure for managing stormwater,
- best practices integrated into local code,
- comprehensive plans,
- conservation easements, and
- watershed planning.

Consultation Outcomes

The consultations provide opportunity to consider the transportation plan's potential environmental effects, the environmental and economic benefits of reducing harmful effects, and local options for better protecting environmental resources. The outcome of the consultations depends on local response and initiatives.

This current round of consultations laid the groundwork to make future consultations more effective. Its value includes developing a baseline of environmental data for comparison, introducing the concept of Regionally Significant Environmental Resources and the economic benefits of their protection, and bringing agencies with different responsibilities together to consider issues of shared concern. This round of consultations with local agencies focused on OKI's 2008 regional transportation plan. In the future, consultations will occur during the transportation plan's development and before its adoption. Consultations will provide insights for considering proposals for improving transportation before projects are recommended.

For consultations now and in the future, the underlying issue considered is how to develop while maintaining environmental resources that warrant conservation or protection. Transportation improvements are one factor that affects development impacts on environmental resources; local agencies also considered the impacts of the existing transportation system and its influence on where development occurs and how its environmental impacts are managed.

The remainder of this report presents local discussion for considering:

- What environmental resources should be conserved for the future?
- Can those resources be degraded as a result of recommended transportation improvements or related development?
- How are those environmental resources protected by local development strategies?
- What local strategies could reduce adverse impacts to those resources?
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