

South Carolina Department of Transportation
Statewide Transportation Planning Process
Consultation and Cooperation with Local Officials in Non-Metropolitan (Rural) Areas
From the 2019 SCDOT Public Participation Plan Update

Background

SCDOT first began enhancing the statewide planning process and local consultation procedures in response to the directives of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA). At that time, rural project identification, evaluation, and prioritization was the responsibility of SCDOT. Consultation with local officials took place as a function of public involvement activities associated with the statewide long-range transportation plan and State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

A revised process was ultimately implemented following the directives of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) and the adoption of the STIP in 2006. A working committee including representatives from South Carolina's ten Council of Governments (COGs) and the FHWA Division Office assisted SCDOT in developing the revised process.

The fundamental change in the process began with a partnership between SCDOT and the ten regional COGs, which have representation from all 46 counties in the state. SCDOT created a Rural System Upgrade Program referred to as Guideshares, which includes the federal-aid construction program for the areas outside of the metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs). Rural Guideshares were allocated by COG regions based on rural population. SCDOT initially prepared a list of potential transportation needs based on travel, congestion, and safety data for each region in the state. The COGs used the listing as the basis for discussion with local officials, economic development groups, and members of the legislative delegation. Through these meetings, additional projects were also identified. The COGs developed steering committees made up of local government staff to evaluate and rank potential projects. Rural project priorities were endorsed by the COG boards and forwarded to the SCDOT Commission for final approval. The COGs facilitated all public involvement activities for projects programmed in the STIP.

In 2012, the SCDOT Commission adopted the Statewide Multi-modal Transportation Plan. The planning process utilized the COGs to develop regional transportation plans that collectively provided the basis for establishing statewide priorities.

Today each COG has transportation functions similar to that of MPOs. A portion of SCDOT's State, Planning, and Research (SPR) funding is allocated to the COGs to facilitate an ongoing rural transportation planning process. Each COG is required to submit a Rural Planning Work Program (RPWP) outlining the planning emphasis areas and planning projects for the year.

To help ensure ongoing communications between SCDOT and the ten COGs, Partnering Sessions are held on a quarterly basis, or as needed, to discuss relevant transportation issues. In addition, SCDOT hosts an annual COG/MPO Workshop, which offers a technical agenda for staff responsible for the day-to-day planning functions.

Planning Process

In accordance with U.S.C. Title 23, Section 135, Statewide Planning, federal law specifies that each State shall carry out a transportation planning process that provides for consideration of projects and strategies that will—

- A. support the economic vitality of the United States, the States, and metropolitan areas, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency;
- B. increase the safety and security of the transportation system for motorized and nonmotorized users;
- C. increase the accessibility and mobility options available to people and for freight;
- D. protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation, and improve quality of life;
- E. enhance the integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes throughout the State, for people and freight;
- F. promote efficient system management and operation and emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system.

Each COG, in partnership with SCDOT, is responsible for implementing a transportation planning process that fully complies with the federal planning requirements established by Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act. Through this process, each COG establishes regional goals and objectives, identifies the current condition of the transportation system, provides research and data analysis, identifies and prioritizes transportation needs for input to the Statewide Multi-modal Transportation Plan and STIP.

Transportation Subcommittees

Each COG maintains a regional transportation advisory committee with representatives from local government, transportation providers, and special interest groups. The COGs are encouraged to include representatives from the SCDOT, MPO staff if appropriate, representative from the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) if appropriate, transportation providers, County Transportation Committee (CTC), planning, zoning, and public works officials, community leaders, school district representatives, as well as underserved populations.

These committees play an important role in identifying, analyzing and prioritizing transportation needs and goals for their respective regions. As a result of the transportation advisory committees and COG boards, local governments are directly consulted and given an opportunity to identify transportation needs on the state system. Transportation advisory committees are encouraged to meet at least bi-annually or as needed to review project status, evaluate proposed modifications to the STIP, update long-range plan and funding priorities, comment on rural functional classification changes, receive input on the rural work programs, and coordinate special studies.

Long-Range Transportation Plans

The rural planning process is based on the development and maintenance of regional transportation plans. Each plan provides a description of the transportation priorities for a 20- 30 year period. At a minimum, regional long-range plans include an inventory of existing highway conditions, projection of future needs (trend or model based), evaluation of potential environmental, social, and cultural impacts, a ranking and prioritization of projects based on Act 114 of 2007, and documentation of public input.

The COGs are encouraged to consider nine elements in their long-range plans, including system upgrade, intersections, freight, bridges, safety, maintenance/resurfacing, signalization, mass transit, and bike and pedestrian facilities. Potential projects are ranked and recommended by the advisory committees to the COG boards based on funding availability. The long-range plans include both constrained and unconstrained needs. Each long-range plan is updated every 5 years from the date of adoption. Each COG maintains a copy of their respective long-range plan for public distribution.

Project Recommendations

Each COG, in cooperation with SCDOT and the Steering Committee, prioritizes transportation needs based on Act 114 of 2007, identified in the long-range plan and STIP. Potential projects and regional priorities reflected in the STIP are endorsed by the COG Board and provided to the SCDOT Commission for their consideration.

Feasibility Reports

Feasibility Reports are conducted in close coordination between SCDOT, MPO's, and COG's for projects identified in the STIP and constrained projects included in long range plans. These reports typically involve transportation improvement projects, such as widening and new location alignment(s).

Elements of the Feasibility Report include defining the purpose and need, the project goals, scope, cost and schedule. Social, cultural, natural resources and environmental concerns are identified using GIS database information for the environmental screening process.

State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)

SCDOT publishes and maintains a 10-year STIP detailing program funding levels, projects, and funding schedules. The STIP is updated every four years. Through the rural planning process, the COGs provide SCDOT with updated project priorities for inclusion in the STIP. Projects must be included in the regional long-range plans prior to being eligible for the STIP. Each COG endorses its regional priorities for consideration by the SCDOT Commission.

Each COG is responsible for advertising and documenting public comments on any amendment to the STIP within their region (see STIP process for definition of amendment/adjustment). The COG has the discretion of advertising by legal ad or press release and chooses the appropriate media distribution based on the program change. STIP amendments require a 21-day comment period, and all comments are forwarded to the SCDOT Secretary of Transportation prior to SCDOT Commission action. The STIP copies are available for public review at the COG office and appropriate SCDOT Engineering District Office(s).

SCDOT is responsible for advertising and distributing copies of the draft STIP to each COG and District Office when an amendment involves a change of statewide significance and for the 3-year update of the STIP.

Statewide Multimodal Transportation Plan

SCDOT maintains a multi-modal transportation plan that provides a comprehensive evaluation of the state's transportation system. The plan provides recommendations for investment in transportation facilities for at least a 20–30-year period. The plan is a product of a partnership with the Federal Highway

Administration (FHWA), the state's COGs and transportation providers. The collection of regional transportation plans, including the long-range plans for the state's Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) provides the underlining framework for the statewide planning plan. The COGs participate in the maintenance and update of the Statewide Multi-modal Transportation Plan every five years.

Rural Work Plans and State Planning Funds

The COGs work under contract with SCDOT to receive SPR funding to support transportation planning activities. Each COG receives an equal share of funding.

Each COG develops a Rural Planning Work Program (RPWP) to define the work elements and specific tasks to be performed within a year. The RPWPs follow the state fiscal year from July 1st to June 30th. The COGs are reimbursed on a quarterly basis for satisfactory work completed as required in their RPWP. Quarterly reports documenting work progress are included with each invoice. SCDOT and FHWA provide planning emphasis areas to encourage specific planning activities, such as freight analysis, safety considerations, bicycle and pedestrian needs, and traditional highway planning. The development and maintenance of the regional long-range transportation plans is an ongoing priority for each COG. Each COG Board endorses the work tasks outlined in the RPWP.

Local Consultation

FAST Act legislation provides for states to consult with and consider the concerns of non-metropolitan officials when making transportation decisions in their Statewide Transportation Planning and Programming processes.

The current rural planning process in South Carolina meets the intent of the local consultation rule by directly involving non-metropolitan local officials through the COGs in developing transportation plans and priorities for their region. This consultation process also applies to the Statewide Multi-modal Transportation Plan, which includes the COGs and other transportation providers as partners in the planning process.