



Chapter 8: Public Outreach, Comments and Coordination

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) recognize that a key component in the success of any transportation project depends on many factors, none of which are more essential than the involvement of the local elected and appointed officials, and community members. An open line of communication between local officials, the public and the Project Management Team is a key component in developing a transportation plan that will best address the concerns of the community. The Project Management Team involved with this project consisted of representatives of INDOT, the FHWA, the Michiana Area Council of Governments (MACOG) and the consulting engineering firm of Bernardin, Lochmueller & Associates, Inc. (BLA). Section 8.1, Public Involvement, will discuss the public involvement plan and process that was utilized during the course of this project. Section 8.2, Project Milestones and Associated Public Outreach Program, will discuss the various milestones (deliverables) associated with the project and the involvement of various stakeholders at each milestone.

8.1 Public Involvement

The public involvement process begins with the gathering of information from those local officials and community members that will live with the project upon its completion. The process continues by providing information to these same stakeholders and keeping them informed of the project's progress and direction. This exchange of information is a dynamic process that continues throughout the life of the project. Goals of the Public Involvement Program include the following:

- Identify potential project stakeholders such as local officials and community members impacted by the project;
- Develop partnering activities that assist with gathering information from stakeholders;
- Foster a positive relationship with stakeholders and keep them informed of the project progress;
- Adequately evaluate potential levels of controversy to address specific concerns and develop context sensitive plans;
- Work together to develop a transportation solution that has broad public support;
- Provide productive forums for members of the public to provide comments.

The US 31 Plymouth to South Bend Project includes an extensive Public Involvement Program. Elements of the program consist of:

- Project web site
- Project Toll Free Hotline
- News Releases



- Elected Officials Briefings
- Stakeholder Meetings
- Community Advisory Committee (CAC) Meetings
- Series of Public Meetings
- Public Hearing

8.1.1 Project Web Site (www.us31study.org)

To provide the public with access to the most current project information available and to provide additional opportunities for public input, the US 31 Management Team has established and maintains a web site for this project. This web site provides:

- Project News and Updates
- Specific Project Information Such As:
 - Project Schedules
 - Listings of Project Meetings
 - Copies of Various Project-Related Documents
- Electronic Forms for Comments
- Subscription to a Project Mailing List
- Alignment Information (Maps)
- Link to Other Web Sites Including INDOT and Other US 31 Projects

As of the end of January 2005, the project web site had been visited approximately 13,000 times.

8.1.2 Project Toll Free Hotline

There is a toll free project hotline at (800) 731-8731 available for information related to the project and for leaving comments. The toll free hotline also identifies the project web site at www.us31study.org as another source of information,

Information and/or actions available on the toll free hotline included:

- Information about Upcoming Public Meetings
- Opportunity to be Added to the Project Mailing List and to Receive Project Updates Via Mail or E-Mail
- Opportunity to Leave a Comment Regarding the Project



8.1.3 News Releases

The US 31 Management Team provided news releases during the study process. The releases were distributed to regional media at key study milestones and were the primary method for informing and involving a wide public audience.

8.1.4 Elected Officials Project Status Briefings

In conjunction with the news releases that were issued during the study process, the Management Team held project status briefings for elected officials. These project status briefings were held at Old Lakeville School Project in Lakeville, Indiana on the same day that the news releases were distributed. The intent of the project status briefings was to provide supporting information related to the items presented in the corresponding news release.

8.1.5 Stakeholder Meetings

Throughout the project, neighborhood associations, civic organizations, local officials, community and business groups, and any other interested individuals were welcome to meet with members of the US 31 Project Management Team to share information and ideas. Project Management Team members had numerous contacts with stakeholders throughout the project as detailed in Section 8.2, Project Milestones and Associated Public Outreach Program. Additionally, Project Management Team members answered numerous questions and addressed comments throughout the project via e-mail through the project web site and by telephone.

8.1.6 Community Advisory Committee Meetings

Early in the development of this project, a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) was formed. The CAC established a method of communication that facilitated distribution of information from the US 31 Project Management Team to the public. The CAC also provided a central location from which the US 31 Management Team could gather public input and feedback on possible alternatives. The CAC consisted of approximately 25 members, representing a diverse cross section of the public, elected officials and appointed officials, and was a valuable source of information and direction to the US 31 Project Management Team. As the project progressed and the areas of impact became more localized, new members representing various groups (i.e.: neighborhood or business associations) were added to the CAC upon their request.

8.1.7 Public Meetings

Open house public meetings were advertised and held at key points in the project's development. The purpose of these meetings was to provide the public with the most current project information available and to provide additional opportunities for public input at various key points (milestones) throughout the study process. Three such meetings, not including the Public Hearing, have been held to date.

8.1.8 Public Hearing

Per 23 CFR 771.111(h), FHWA has approved the "INDOT Public Involvement Procedures". These procedures call for a formal Public Hearing after issuance of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The DEIS was made available for review and comment on February 13, 2004. A Public Hearing to discuss the findings of the DEIS for the US 31 – Plymouth to South Bend Study was held on Thursday, March 18, 2004.



8.1.9 Resource Agency Coordination

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) calls for an examination and consideration of impacts of a proposed action on sensitive resources for a project such as this US 31 EIS. These resources include, but are not limited to, floodplains, wetlands, endangered species, historic and archaeological sites, parklands, air quality, wildlife habitat, etc. There also are the transportation needs that must be fulfilled and socio-economic impacts that require consideration. Because of impacts to resources, socio-economic impacts and needed transportation improvements, there is a balanced decision-making process that considers a range of factors of both impacts to the resources and the transportation needs. To produce better environmental decisions, agencies with special expertise or jurisdiction by law are included in the EIS process. This resource agency involvement begins early in the study to identify important issues related to the proposed action and continues throughout the study to avoid conflict later, ensuring full input from the various agencies.

8.1.10 Section 106 Consulting Party Coordination

Congress set forth the importance of historic and archaeological resources upon the fabric of American life as a part of the National Historic Preservation Act (1966) (NHPA), which states that “the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people.” As a result of the NHPA, federal agencies are required to take into account the impact of federal undertakings upon historic properties in the area of the undertaking. Historic properties include buildings, structures, sites, objects, and/or districts within the Area of Potential Effects. The Section 106 Report in the Appendix describes the Section 106 Consulting Party Coordination in detail.