Environmental Study Process

The proposed I-26 Connector (TIP Project I-2513) will involve state and federal funds. Any agency that proposes a project involving federal funds must comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Under NEPA, an agency must study the adverse and beneficial environmental impacts of alternatives that meet a project's purpose and need. This planning process is divided into the steps described in detail below.

STEP 1: Initiate project and collect project data

Develop the purpose and need for the project.
Inventory issues that may affect project, including existing land use along the project corridor to determine areas and elements protected by laws and environmental regulations. Identify potential needs for the project, which will assist in determining the purpose for the project.

STEP 2: Identify alternatives

Develop Land Suitability Mapping
A Land Suitability Map is a map of major features and constraints that can affect the location of a highway project. These features include steep topography, wetlands, floodplains, streams, neighborhoods, industrial sites, hazardous waste sites, historic properties, federal lands, and community facilities such as parks, schools, libraries, fire stations, and hospitals. Sources for this information include the US Geological Survey topographic maps, US Fish and Wildlife Service National Wetland Inventory, and geographic information provided by local governments.

Perform Preliminary Field Studies
These studies included preliminary surveys to field check the data obtained for the land suitability mapping.

Hold a Public Meeting
Public Meetings are held with the general public to explain the project development process, display land suitability mapping, identify project constraints, obtain input on the purpose and need for the project and discuss alternatives developed for a project.

Document Community Concerns

Select Alternatives for Detailed Study
Preliminary alternatives are evaluated to determine their ability to meet the purpose of the project, while avoiding or minimalizing impacts to the human and natural environment. The best preliminary alternatives are selected for further evaluation.

STEP 3: Conduct detailed studies

Perform Detailed Field Surveys
These surveys include intensive field surveys for protected plant and animal species, wetlands, and streams within the boundaries of the Detailed Study Alternatives. Field studies for noise and relocation impacts also are conducted.

Perform Engineering Studies
Each alternative is evaluated for adequacy, safety and the ability to be constructed. Preliminary engineering designs are developed for each of the Detailed Study Alternatives.

Environmental Analyses
Issues that are evaluated include but are not limited to traffic, land use, farmland, socioeconomic factors, residential/business relocations, environmental justice, air quality, noise, natural resources (wetlands, streams, endangered species), hydraulics, floodplains, archaeological and historic resources, hazardous substances/underground storage tanks, visual impacts, and construction impacts.

STEP 4: Prepare a Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Publish a Draft Environmental Impact Statement
The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) will include the purpose and need for the project and summaries of the alternatives analysis, detailed field surveys, preliminary engineering, and environmental analyses.

STEP 5: Hold a Public Hearing

The hearing provides a formal opportunity for public comment and input regarding the project designs and DEIS.

STEP 6: Identify the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative

The North Carolina Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration identify the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative (LEDPA) based on the results described in the DEIS and input received from citizens and governmental agencies (i.e. local government officials and federal and state environmental regulatory and resource agencies).

STEP 7: Prepare a Final Environmental Impact Statement

Revise the Preliminary Engineering Design Plans for the LEDPA as necessary to minimize impacts to the human and natural environments.

Publish the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

The FEIS will include the purpose and need for the project, environmental analyses of the detailed study alternatives and summaries of the alternative analyses.

STEP 8: Prepare a Record of Decision

A Record of Decision (ROD) will explain the reasons for the project decisions, summarize any mitigation measures that will be incorporated in the project, and document alternative selection.

Steps Beyond: Beyond the Environmental Process

Following publication of the ROD, final engineering design plans are prepared for the selected alternative, after which right-of-way acquisition (buying of property needed to construct the road) and construction of the roadway can proceed.