

Successes **in** Stewardship

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January 2010

Supporting Environmental Streamlining Through Funded Positions

SAFETEA-LU As a Catalyst for Funded Positions

The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) was signed into law in August 2005. Section 6002, one of several SAFETEA-LU provisions focused on streamlining the environmental review process, allowed State Departments of Transportation (DOTs) to use Federal funding to support staff at Federal and State resource agencies. These staff, who are referred to as funded positions or transportation liaisons, are commonly assigned to regulatory or resource agencies. State DOTs fund liaisons to work on expediting transportation-project review and delivery.

In October 2009, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), with support from the Volpe National Transportation Systems Center (Volpe Center), completed a report on SAFETEA-LU Section 6002-supported funded positions, entitled the [State Transportation Liaison Funded Positions Study](#). The project was funded by the Surface Transportation Environment and Planning Cooperative Research Program (STEP). The report explores trends in the use of funded positions and provides recommendations to State DOTs and resource agencies to encourage more effective use of these positions.

Report research occurred in two phases. First, samples of funded position program documents, including interagency agreements and program manuals, were reviewed. Then, telephone interviews were conducted with program participants from eight States: California, Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and Washington. Participants included State DOT and resource agency program managers as well as funded position staff. The evaluated programs ranged from those established prior to the enactment of SAFETEA-LU to those created in the last several years.

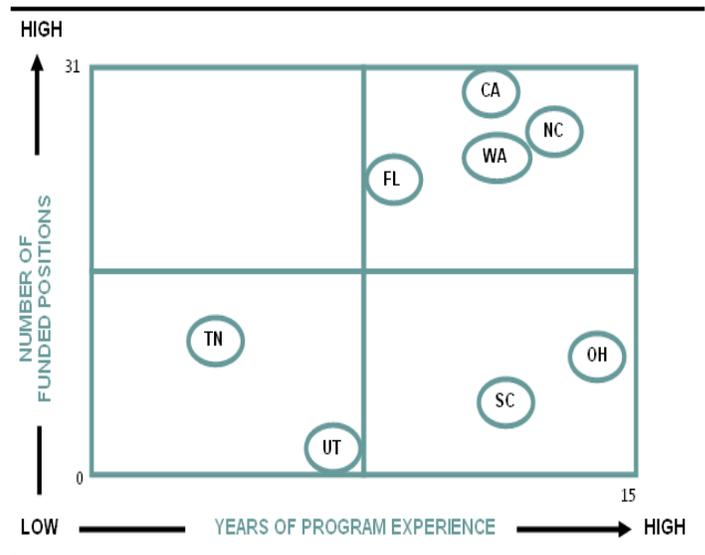
Features of Funded position Programs

The *State Transportation Liaison Funded Positions Study* examined features of different funded position programs, including size and maturity, identification of funded positions' needs, unique agency responses to challenges, and benefits.

Program Size and Maturity

Funded position programs identified for the study varied in size and maturity. FHWA measured size by determining the number of supported positions and it calculated maturity by measuring the length of time that the program had been in use. In general, more mature programs were larger and younger programs were smaller. Several issues that were identified were related to program size or maturity. For example, some States with larger programs reported difficulties in maintaining consistent communication with liaisons, whereas some with smaller programs did not have this problem. Additionally, agencies with younger programs tended to utilize quantitative evaluation metrics, such as permit-turnaround time and number of permits approved, to evaluate liaisons' performance. More mature programs tended to integrate qualitative metrics, such as liaisons' ability to mediate conflict, into the performance evaluation.

Expressed Needs of Funded Positions



Graphic showing the relationship between funded position program size and maturity for eight study States. (Courtesy of the Volpe Center)

Many State DOTs and resource agencies expressed similar needs for funded position programs. These areas of need included expedited project delivery and additional staff support during periods of increased workload. Funded positions were identified as a mechanism to help increase collaboration, dialogue, and facilitation between the State DOT and resource agencies.

Challenges and Benefits

States encountered several challenges when implementing funded position programs, including difficulty in recruiting qualified candidates to fill short-term positions. Some State DOTs developed creative solutions. For example, to overcome constraints on hiring full-time government employees to fill liaison positions, one resource agency hired a retired resource agency employee through an existing contract with a consulting firm. In addition, resource agency and State DOT liaison managers reported difficulty in developing meaningful qualitative measures to assess funded positions' performance; however, some State DOTs attempted to develop these types of measures. Despite these challenges, States reported common benefits of the program, including more effective communication and stronger working relationships between State DOTs and resource agencies, often leading to project streamlining and a clearer understanding of objectives.

Findings on Funded Position Programs

The *State Transportation Liaison Funded Positions Study* found that State DOTs and resource agencies make a number of important decisions during each stage of developing, implementing, and maintaining funded position programs. On the basis of the study's findings, FHWA developed a six-step process to capture the decision-making stages (see side box). This process provides a general framework to guide States in managing funded position programs while allowing for individualized approaches.

Additional findings from the report include the following:

- In many cases, quantifying the need for funded positions helped to generate support and funding for a program. Some State DOTs used the number of permits required during a specified timeframe to determine the number of liaisons needed to review the permits. In many cases, these types of calculations helped to demonstrate the positive improvements that a funded position program generates to State government officials.
- Development of a Memorandum of Understanding or another type of agreement helped to formalize programs. Agreements aided liaisons, State DOTs, and resource agencies in defining roles and responsibilities.
- Previous experience in transportation planning, community development, or conflict resolution helped funded position staff to fulfill their job responsibilities.
- Liaisons provided with training opportunities were able to fulfill their job responsibilities more effectively.
- Funded position staff primarily participated in activities related to environmental streamlining and project development, such as DOT permit review or mitigation-site evaluation. Some liaisons were involved in transportation planning activities.
- Provision of a single point of contact for liaison management at the State DOT helped to facilitate communication of project priorities.

Six-Step Decisionmaking Process

1. Assess the need and demand for funded positions.
2. Generate program support.
3. Design a program.
4. Formalize interagency agreements.
5. Implement and manage the program.
6. Evaluate program outcomes.

Next Steps

A national liaison peer exchange was held in September 2009. A draft version of the *State Transportation Liaison Funded Positions Study* was disseminated at the event and an overview of report findings was provided in order to stimulate discussion. Future events will include a webinar in February 2010 to discuss the study and share State DOT and liaison perspectives on funded position programs. Additionally, STEP funding will be utilized to support a Liaison Community of Practice in order to encourage a peer exchange on best practices and lessons learned with regard to liaison-program administration and substantive environmental and regulatory issues. These next steps will help to guide funded position

programs, which are still relatively young, through the maturation process and will continue to help agencies make progress in better managing and implementing the programs.

The *State Transportation Liaison Funded Positions Study* has advanced the knowledge related to trends in funded position programs. As these programs increase in size and complexity, research on emerging trends and challenges will continue to support them in contributing to transportation planning and the environmental streamlining process.

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Look What's New!

- FHWA has published *[A Guide to Measuring Progress in Linking Transportation Planning and Environmental Analysis](#)* (2009) to assist transportation agencies in developing their own programs to measure the successes of PEL-related activities. The guide provides a measurement framework, an overall PEL goal, four sample objectives, and an array of example metrics to track progress toward achieving the goals and objectives.
- The 2010 Transportation Research Board (TRB) 89th Annual Meeting will be held January 10 – 14, 2010, in Washington, D.C. The TRB program contains over 70 sessions, panels, workshops, and committee meetings related to environmental research. For more information, please visit the [TRB Annual Meeting – Environment website](#).
- On December 23, 2009, the notice of request for public comment on the Surface Transportation Project Delivery Pilot Program; Caltrans Audit Report appeared in the [Federal Register](#). The public comment period will extend until January 22, 2010.

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