

# Successes In Stewardship



U.S. Department of Transportation  
Federal Highway Administration

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## More Efficient and Effective Permitting and Environmental Review Speeds Work on Tappan Zee Bridge Replacement

Investments in America's infrastructure provide short- and long-term benefits, such as job creation and economic growth, which are achieved by ensuring that people, goods, energy, and information can move quickly and efficiently throughout the country. Building transportation assets, especially large projects such as multi-state bridges, requires a lot of planning and research that can take years to complete.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), along with other Federal agencies and the White House, has recognized the importance of expediting such projects. The environmental review process, in particular, can be especially time and resource intensive, and has thus become a focal point of accelerating project delivery.

### National Focus on Accelerating Environmental Review Creates New Opportunities for Project Collaboration and Tracking

Nearly five years ago, the White House released a Presidential Memorandum that instructed Federal agencies to coordinate permitting and environmental review to expedite the process required to build high-priority projects. As a result of this and other guidance from the White House, agencies across the Country have worked to more consistently track important information for infrastructure projects, better facilitate early collaboration of infrastructure reviews, streamline environmental review timelines, and increase accountability for internal and external stakeholders.

One exemplary project that has utilized guidance on accelerating project delivery from the White House and FHWA is the Tappan Zee Bridge Replacement project, which completed the environmental review and permitting process in February 2013. FHWA supported this accelerated review process and is committed to sharing the benefits of this project and others it has supported, is supporting, or will support as the Dashboard continues to facilitate synchronized, coordinated, and transparent reviews.

### Timeline of Presidential Actions to Modernize Infrastructure Permitting

**August 2011:** [Presidential Memorandum--Speeding Infrastructure Development through More Efficient and Effective Permitting and Environmental Review](#)

was released to (1) to mandate expedited review of selected high-priority projects and (2) to improve accountability, transparency, and efficiency through information technology.

**March 2012:** [Executive Order—Improving Performance of federal Permitting and Review of Infrastructure Projects](#) was issued to add more transparency, accountability, and certainty into the permitting and review processes for major infrastructure projects.

**May 2013:** [Presidential Memorandum--Modernizing Federal Infrastructure Review and Permitting Regulations, Policies, and Procedures](#) tasked an interagency Steering Committee with developing a plan to put these best practices to work in a systematic and permanent way across the government.

**May 2014:** [Implementation Plan for the Presidential Memorandum on Modernizing Infrastructure Permitting](#) is a comprehensive plan to accelerate and expand permitting reform government-wide. The plan adopts the best practices learned from focus projects and calls on federal agencies to apply those practices.

**September 2015:** [Guidance Establishing Metrics for the Permitting and Environmental Review of Infrastructure Projects](#) called on agencies to track information for infrastructure projects across their portfolios and to report a common set of timeframe metrics for all infrastructure projects seeking Federal actions (e.g., funding, permitting, rights-of-way).

## Accelerating Tappan Zee Bridge Replacement Project Timeline by Years

The Tappan Zee Bridge was originally built in 1955, and though it has remained safe to the public since that time, it did not meet current efficiency standards for design or traffic operations as of a few years ago. Over the last 30 years, traffic volumes on the bridge have grown by almost 30 percent, and now approximately 138,000 vehicles cross the bridge each day. The Tappan Zee Bridge Replacement project was selected to undergo accelerated permitting and review because of the vital links it provides to regional and national transportation networks.

The Tappan Zee Bridge Replacement project was an ideal candidate for accelerated review because of the safety, operational, mobility, and structural needs it addresses for the region. As a major route for freight movement between points east and west of the Hudson River, the Tappan Zee Bridge is the primary roadway connection between New England and the Port of New York and New Jersey. The bridge provides the only interstate highway crossing of the Hudson River for a 48-mile stretch between the George Washington Bridge in New York City (I-95) and the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge (I-84).

For a project with such a large scope and environmental setting, the number of approvals required to begin design and construction was substantial. The complex scope and important transportation needs identified above led FHWA to determine that the project would benefit from accelerated permitting and environmental review. This was achieved by: (1) coordinating concurrent reviews and approvals among the partner agencies; (2) establishing comprehensive schedules to ensure each step in the process was properly completed; and (3) integrating environmental reviews, permitting, and consultations.

### Partner Agencies

- Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
- National Marine Fisheries Service
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- U.S. Coast Guard
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
- New York State Department of State
- New York State Office of General Services
- State Historic Preservation Officer of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

## Concurrent Reviews Reduce the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Process from Years to Months



Tappan Zee Bridge under construction (courtesy of New York State Thruway)

FHWA coordinated with ten Federal and State agencies to complete the accelerated review process, which is similar to the level of coordination FHWA employs for most infrastructure projects. However, the specific way in which FHWA conducted this coordination sets the Tappan Zee Bridge Replacement project apart and significantly accelerated the permitting and review process. To enhance collaboration and coordination among the involved agencies, FHWA held “Agency Summits” at which expectations were discussed and priorities established. Through this collaborative process, FHWA was able to develop an environmental document that several other agencies were able to adopt to meet their own regulatory needs.

The project also completed the Section 404 public outreach and approval process concurrently with the NEPA process. If a project necessitates the discharge of dredged or fill materials into wetlands or other water an agency must first obtain the appropriate authorization from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The authorization, which is required by Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, includes a public involvement requirement. This time savings, along with the time

saved by simultaneously educating contractors about the design-build process, allowed FHWA to apply for its project permit much earlier in the development and review process. Together, these activities accelerated the environmental review process of a project with significant environmental impacts—doing in months what can often take years to accomplish, given the complexity of approving and building new infrastructure projects.

## Internal Coordination and External Workshops Improve Communications and Accelerate Permitting

Typically, State sponsors submit a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) and other environmental review documents, FHWA reviews the drafts and provides comments, and then both agencies exchange comments and make revisions until the documents are finalized. The entire NEPA process can take between five and seven years. For the Tappan Zee Bridge Replacement project, FHWA and the State sponsors wrote and edited the documents simultaneously through working sessions, eliminating the typical waiting periods between comments and revisions. Though this method required a more

substantial upfront labor commitment from staff, it allowed the agencies to produce a final EIS and complete the NEPA process in just 12 months.

To further streamline the process, the partner agencies held monthly calls where one point of contact from each participating agency represented the interests and capabilities of their agency. These calls increased transparency and established trust among the planning partners.

Additionally, the State sponsor decided to employ a design-build method, in which design and construction happen simultaneously after the permitting and environmental review processes have been completed. Because this was the first design-build project in New York State, FHWA held a design-build workshop to introduce the permitting agencies to the design-build process to encourage them to provide permit conditions earlier in the process, rather than after final design. This allowed the State sponsor to incorporate them in NEPA as well as the contract documents, which kept the construction phase on schedule and reduced the permitting process by several months.

### **Accelerated Reviews Provide Substantial Benefits, But Are Not One-Size-Fits All**

Accelerated project delivery may not be appropriate for all projects because it is a labor- and resource-intensive process. The FHWA New York Division Office relied on partners within FHWA Headquarters and the FHWA Resource Center to provide additional support, which accelerated project timelines. The critical transportation needs of this crossing outweighed the costs of accelerating the review process.

The most substantive benefit of accelerated reviews will be an earlier completion date for the new bridge. Traditional timeline estimates suggest that if the project had not undergone accelerated permitting and review, bridge construction would not yet have begun, pushing the completion date several more years into the future. Other benefits the partners experienced included stronger relationships, no duplication of effort, reduced permitting time, and improved accountability for timing decisions and establishing priorities. The project also provided economic benefits by creating approximately 38,000 construction jobs.

### **Accelerated Project Delivery Will Continue to Gain Momentum in 2016**

The benefits of accelerated permitting and environmental review for infrastructure projects can be substantial, and the White House, along with FHWA and its partners across the Federal government, are working to standardize these gains for agencies and the public. They also look forward to continuing to support and promote high-priority projects such as the Tappan Zee Bridge project.

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#### **Look What's New!**

- The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) released the [2014/2015 Implementing Eco-Logical Program Annual Report](#), which provides updates on FHWA's Eco-Logical Program, in particular the Implementing Eco-Logical initiative funded through the Second Strategic Highway Research Program (SHRP2) in coordination with the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and the Transportation Research Board (TRB).
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [announced a final rule](#) that uses flexibilities under section 4(d) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to tailor protections to areas affected by white-nose syndrome during the northern long-eared bat's most sensitive life stages. The rules is designed to protect the bat while minimizing regulatory requirements for landowners, land managers, government agencies, and others within the species' range.

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