

To: Transportation Intergovernmental Advisory Group
From: Work Group on Communications and Education
Re: Final Report and Recommendations
Date: Jan. 24, 2011

The Intergovernmental Work Group on Communications and Education herewith submits its final report and recommendations for improving communications and relationships between the N.C. Department of Transportation and its partner organizations in MPOs, RPOs and municipal and county governments.

In this cover memorandum, we summarize our deliberations, findings and recommendations, as well as the history of the group's work.

First, we would like to thank the Intergovernmental Advisory Group for the opportunity for our team to study the issues of communications and education as relates to improving the working relationship between state and local governments on matters of transportation policy and programs. Effective communications in particular is a crucial area that often determines the success, or lack thereof, of effectively serving the transportation needs of the public, which is our mutual goal.

We would also like to commend NCDOT for convening the Advisory Group in the first place. That such a cooperative enterprise was undertaken is a testament to the Department's commitment to improved intergovernmental relations. We recognize that NCDOT has made great strides in that direction under the Department's current leadership. Accountability and transparency have become the hallmarks of Gov. Perdue's administration in general and NCDOT's operations in particular. In the last two years, the Transportation Department has emerged as one of the most open and responsive agencies in state government.

The Work Group at the outset set these goals for itself:

- Establish a standing method for local officials to communicate and be educated related to transportation issues, policies and concerns.
- Determine what communication policies are currently in place for mayors and county commissioner chairs, etc., and how they could be improved.
- Determine what education needs exist within the stakeholder group and develop recommendations to meet those needs.

This report is the product of four meetings over the course of the last year, as well as considerable outside work on the part of group members. Our work included a survey of local and state transportation officials regarding the effectiveness of communications between the two levels. The survey received 802 responses, including extensive individual comments from respondents. The survey results are attached.

The Work Group co-chairs also met separately with MPO and RPO organizations to gather further input.

Our report includes recommendations in the following areas: Decentralization, Education, Personnel/Administration, Internal Improvements, Cooperation and Partnerships, and Customer Service.

The recommendations on decentralization might raise questions as to how that topic relates to communications and education. The committee determined early on - based on its own discussions, the survey and outside consultation - that local-state communications is hampered by a lack of clarity as to where to get information within NCDOT, unclear lines of authority to make decisions and give answers, and a sense that units in Raleigh are less responsive than those in the field.

We recognized that the NCDOT leadership has made a commitment to delegate more decision-making to the field and to broaden division responsibility from highway to multi-modal. The Work Group applauds that

initiative but felt that it has yet to achieve its full potential, thus hampering communication. We also recognize the need for effective management and control from Raleigh and that budget and staffing restrictions limit how much responsibility can be delegated.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important initiative to better serve the transportation needs of our citizens. We consider the work of our group to be completed but stand ready to answer questions or otherwise assist in the Steering Committee's efforts.

Attachments:

Communication and Education Work Group Recommendations
Work Group membership
2010 Survey

Intergovernmental Work Group on Communications and Education
Final Recommendations
January 24, 2011

Decentralization. Facilitate better state-local relationships and communication by delegating more responsibility and decision-making authority from Raleigh central offices to division/district offices. Some specific suggestions:

- Consider assigning a work group under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Steering Committee to develop and publish a decentralization/regionalization document that spells out clearly how decision-making authority and resources are intended to be allocated between Raleigh and the divisions. The group should look to other states and FHWA for transportation initiatives that employ a decentralized model.
- Move more staff (i.e., project design and planning) out of Raleigh and into divisions, or assign staff in Raleigh according to region, as is done with programming and traffic engineering. Reflect those changes in organization chart. Include modal expertise where appropriate in the divisions.
- Identify position within each NCDOT unit (where appropriate) and at division level who is assigned to communicate with local government on a timely basis and is responsible for seeing projects through from start to finish.
- Clarify who has decision-making authority for each tier of roadway (statewide, regional, local). Empower lower level staff, both in Raleigh and divisions, to make decisions. Provide tracking system for divisions to record decisions made locally that are overruled at state level.

Education. Inadequate communication between state and local governments often is a function of a lack of shared knowledge base. That should be addressed by a structured learning/knowledge transfer program that includes the following:

- Transportation 101 course to be offered annually by UNC School of Government or other appropriate entity for MPO/RPO orientations, new legislators, newly elected local officials etc.
- Develop educational opportunities on transportation topics for local government and offer them via webinars, in person, through regional meetings, integrated into other organizations' existing meetings, before local governing boards, etc. Some suggested topics, including but not limited to:
 - Prioritization.
 - Using the website to check project status.
 - Relationship building with your division staff and Board member.
- Develop training module for NCDOT staff on understanding local needs, customer service, and diversity training.
- Provide cross-training between local and state transportation planners.
- Identify best practices among the divisions and circulate among them (including a best practices document on contracts and agreements).

Personnel/Administration. Communications from NCDOT is hampered by lower level staff not adequately acquainted with programs and projects to authoritatively respond to local government needs. The department can address this problem by enhancing its principal of "Make NCDOT a great place to work," specifically:

- Address the lack of institutional knowledge at NCDOT by developing mentoring and succession-planning programs which will ensure that, as experienced employees leave state employment or reach retirement – as more of the Baby Boom will - trained replacements are in place and the knowledge base is preserved.
- Address the lack of experienced staff at NCDOT through incentive plans that reward/incent high-performing employees to stay at the Department.

Internal Improvements. NCDOT can be difficult to penetrate.

- Develop plan/flow chart for disseminating information from NCDOT to board members, elected officials, legislators, MPO/RPOs, local government staff.
- Improve NCDOT website to make it more navigable and usable for non-engineers, lay people.
 - Consider web content and design standards such as more use of narratives, hotlinks to glossary, USA Today newspaper-like writing, etc.
- Update and maintain NCDOT online staff directory and ensure voicemail available to leave messages. Assign someone at NCDOT with ongoing responsibility for updating electronic distribution lists.

Cooperation and Partnerships. Better utilize MPO/RPO staff and statewide associations.

- Use existing newsletters of MPO/RPO/other statewide organizations for sharing NCDOT information.
- Develop protocol for interaction with MPO/RPOs such as including them in communications with communities, accountability for accuracy of information given to them, etc.
- Ensure NCDOT sends appropriate level staff to meetings with MPOs/RPOs.
- Better utilize the expertise that exists in MPOs and work more cooperatively on issues (e.g., rescission).
- Improve the relationship between MPO/RPO/Division staffs by hosting retreats, especially at the TCC level.
- Invite the MPO/RPO staff to all merger/scoping meetings from the beginning.

Customer Service. NCDOT has in recent years moved to a culture of customer service, accountability and responsiveness. Reinforce that culture.

- Create customer service survey opportunities for MPO/RPO staff to complete and include as part of NCDOT department's review.
- Set standards for who is the lead contact at NCDOT for information (i.e., Board member, Division, District, etc.), expectations for timely responses to e-mail/phone messages, and an electronic tracking system/database for measuring customer service and ensuring compliance with standards. Consider establishing a Performance Management benchmarking process/program.
- Build in more time for local governments/staffs to respond to NCDOT requests for information reflective of the timetable required by MPOs/RPOs/local government to respond.