



THE KEY TO GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Research Prevails at the Federal Highway Administration

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These are tough economic times for the nation—not just for individuals, but for the entire government, at all levels, who now feel the pinch.

History has shown that in tight fiscal times, government programs like training and research are often among those which take the biggest hit. Furthermore, those engaged in government programs as employees or consultants have an even tougher time obtaining scarce financial resources for even the most promising research projects. Now more than ever, we need to be innovative and persistent in trying to secure the funding needed to carry out research that will help move our programs forward.

With that in mind, we realize the importance of staying up-to-date on the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) current research endeavors pertaining to realty program management and outdoor advertising control. The term "current" is used because the structure of some of the FHWA's research efforts has recently changed. In this article, we hope to clear up some of the murkiness that surrounds new research.

COOPERATIVE RESEARCH

Surface Transportation Environment and Planning (STEP) is the cooperative research program that was authorized by Congress in Section 5207 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). The general objective of the STEP is to improve understanding of the complex relationship between surface transportation, planning and the environment. Funding for STEP is authorized through fiscal year 2009.

The FHWA Office of Planning, Environment and Realty is responsible for STEP, and uses it to carry out a variety of research efforts. The programs overseen by the Office of Real Estate Services in connection

with Realty Program Management and Outdoor Advertising Control (OAC), together, are among 17 research areas funded through STEP.

This FHWA website allows stakeholders to submit research ideas for the coming fiscal year. The proposed framework chart, found on the FHWA STEP website, (www.fhwa.DOT.gov/hep/step/index.htm) illustrates the overall framework of the program.

Through STEP, the FHWA gives stakeholders the opportunity to help shape research priorities, to leverage funding for collaborative research, to assist in developing specific activities and to evaluate the results of STEP-funded research. Over the summer, the FHWA will refine the STEP implementation strategy, the goals and specific areas of emphasis. A notice will be published in the Federal Register and on the FHWA STEP website to solicit feedback for fiscal year 2009 STEP research. We encourage stakeholders to check the website periodically for updated information.

REALTY PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

The FHWA Office of Real Estate Services is responsible for implementation and stewardship of the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970, as amended (Uniform Act), as part of its responsibility for Realty Program Management. In fiscal year 2008, we solicited feedback for STEP. In response to the call for submissions, 38 different ideas were submitted by stakeholders and included a wide variety of topics. Many of the suggestions received focused on professional development, workshops, realty program related material, templates, forms, guides and courses. Other submissions included requests for the FHWA to provide peer exchanges and domestic scans.

OUTDOOR ADVERTISING CONTROL

The Office of Real Estate Services also promulgates regulations, policies, and guidelines to implement the OAC program, as required by the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. Several stakeholders requested OAC studies on the safety of digital signs (a follow-up activity related to the previous FHWA OAC neutral assessment), which would entail an evaluation of compensation for signs and a study of the effectiveness of OAC program implementation.

STEP FUNDING FOR FISCAL YEAR 2008

The Office of Real Estate Services anticipates using STEP funds to improve the quality of service provided to its partners and customers. The following five projects were selected to receive fiscal year 2008 STEP funding:

1. Support Stakeholder and Partner Outreach and Informational Dissemination Programs

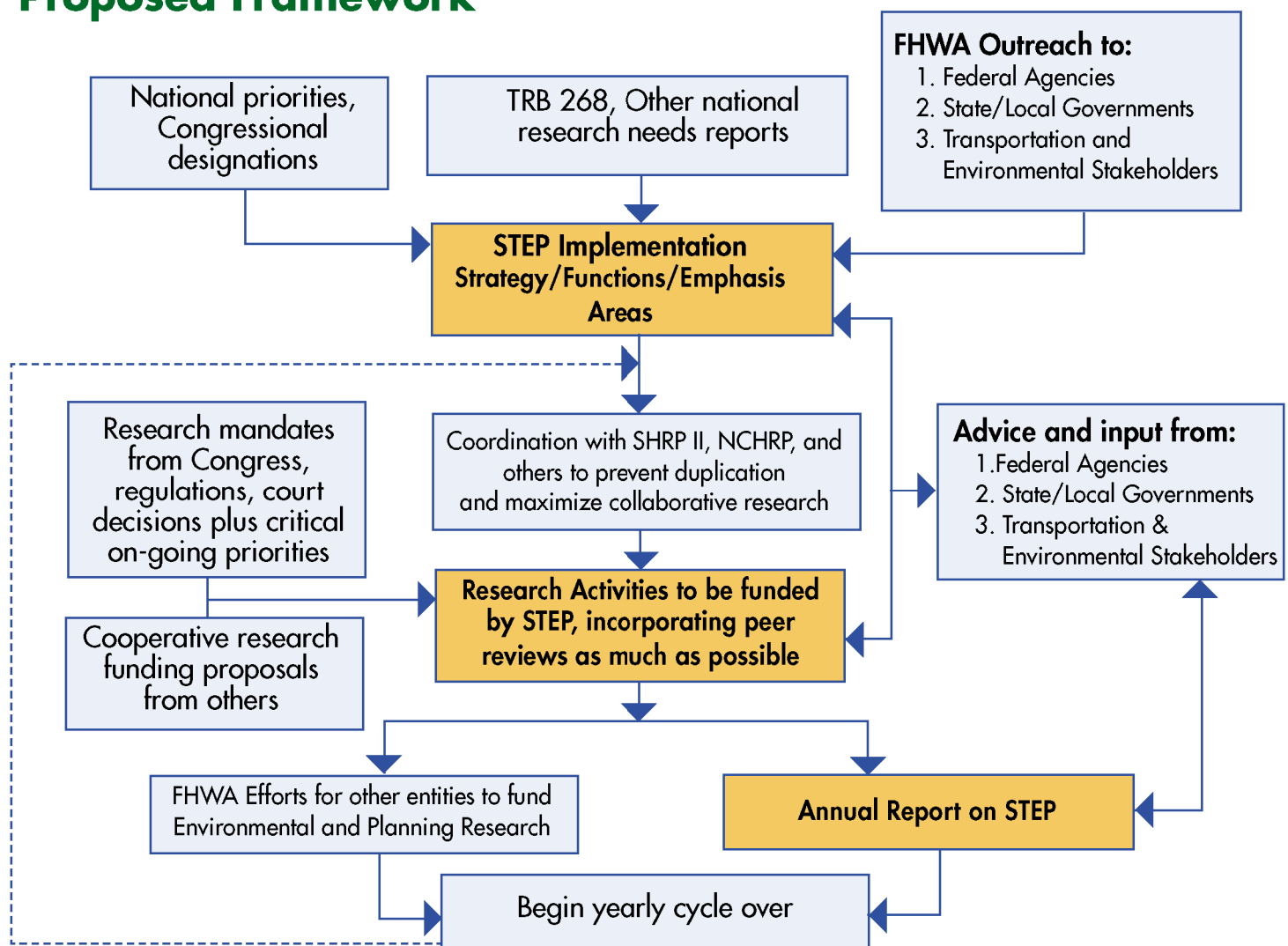
This project supports conferences and symposiums initiated by our partners and stakeholders. It resulted from concerns expressed to the FHWA regarding the continuing loss of institutional knowledge

and a resultant loss of professional capacity throughout the right of way professional community. The FHWA is enhancing professional relationships within the right of way community by participating in workshops, training, outreach programs, expert panels and peer reviews. They encourage the development of tools to advance the implementation and administration of the federal-aid right of way program and its implementing regulations. The FHWA seeks to promote innovative information sharing among practitioners who are responsible for realty and OAC programs.

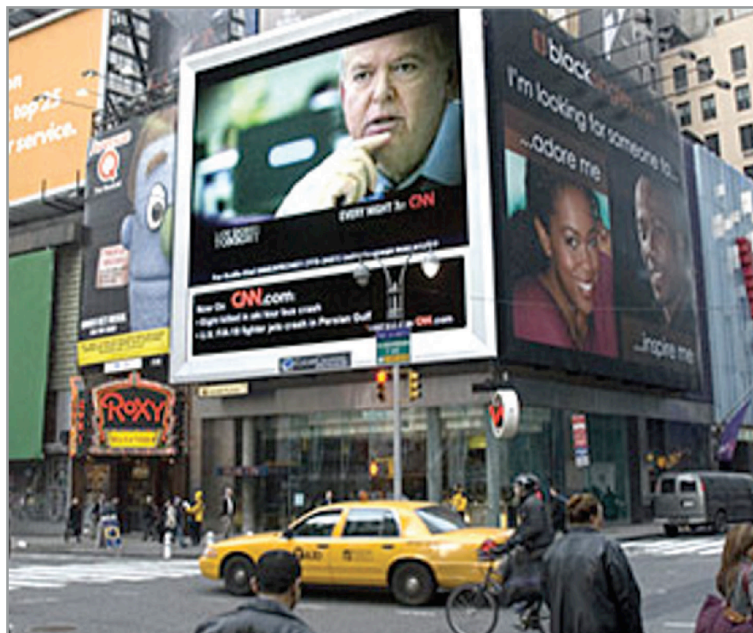
2. Identification and Development of Local Public Agency Stewardship Tools and Techniques

Increasingly, federal-aid programs and projects are being undertaken by local public agencies (LPAs). Federal funding for the LPA programs flows from the state Departments of Transportation (DOTs) to LPAs. State DOTs provide programmatic oversight and stewardship for federal-aid programs and projects in their state. LPAs encounter a variety of challenges in implementing and administering the requirements of the Uniform Act. This research study will identify and evaluate successful LPA stewardship and oversight programs and the common program challenges that are faced by LPAs and state DOTs.

Proposed Framework



This chart illustrates the framework for STEP research. Major products for which FHWA will seek public and stakeholder feedback are bolded. The figure reads from top to bottom.



Research results will identify best management practices, strategic planning processes, communications, training and methods for measurement of continuous improvement.

3. Peer Exchange on Applications of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in the Right of Way Area

The Offices of Real Estate Services and Interstate and Border Planning will collaborate in conducting a peer exchange focusing on the stages of implementing GIS in right of way. The exchange will include discussion of Phase 2 research by the Transportation Research Board's National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) study called *Integrating Geospatial Technologies into the Right of Way Data Management Process* (Project 8-55). Peers will discuss the state of GIS practice in right of way at the state DOTs. Results will be shared as best management practices and tools.

4. Peer Exchange for Use of Incentive Payments in Right of Way Acquisition and Relocation Programs

In 2006, FHWA's Office of Real Estate Services issued guidance called Right of Way Incentive Payments (Voluntary) for Acquisitions and Relocations. The guidance provides flexibility for saving time on acquisitions and relocations. The goal of this study is to identify criteria used by state DOTs or LPAs, and evaluate the use, documentation and program results (or savings) based on data from state DOTs that have implemented an incentive program. Research results will identify and share best management practices, criteria, guides and tools. Details are available online at www.fhwa.dot.gov/realestate/acqincentguid.htm.

5. Neutral Assessment of the National OAC Program - National Policy Dialogue

In 2007, the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution (U.S. Institute) issued the final report from the FHWA neutral assessment of the national OAC program. The FHWA will continue to use the U.S. Institute to contact representative stakeholders to obtain feedback on possible courses of action to address areas of conflict and improve program results. The following issues have been identified as important to stakeholders and as having significant potential for agreement:

- Use of new technology
- Abuses of signage in commercial and industrial areas
- Future of nonconforming signs
- Control of vegetation in public right of way around billboards
- Inconsistent regulation and enforcement
- Organization of the OAC Program within the FHWA

STEP FUNDING FOR FISCAL YEARS 2006 AND 2007

In response to stakeholder input for fiscal years 2006 and 2007, the FHWA initiated a two-phase driver attention and distraction study aimed at the effects on drivers of commercial electronic variable message signs. The first phase, which is now underway, will establish the parameters for the second phase, in which the research will be conducted. The FHWA has a portion of the funding needed for the second phase and is actively seeking additional funding, possibly from state DOTs. There has been a great deal of interest in a driver distraction study as additional state DOTs are now permitting commercial digital signs with changing messages. If state DOTs are interested in contributing funds to this effort, they are encouraged to email Catherine O'Hara at catherine.o'hara@dot.gov. An additional OAC study has been approved to evaluate the effect of advertising signs on the tourist industry.

OTHER COLLABORATIVE STUDIES

NATIONAL COOPERATIVE HIGHWAY RESEARCH PROGRAM (NCHRP)

While the FHWA Office of Real Estate Services receives its primary funding resource through STEP, it can leverage STEP funds by using them as a contribution to NCHRP studies. Typically, research topics are submitted to the NCHRP selection panels by state DOT research

sections. Currently, the Office of Real Estate Services is partnering with the NCHRP to sponsor a study called *Right of Way Methods and Tools to Control Project Cost Escalation*. This study is designed to review best practices specifically focused on the right of way aspects of cost estimating and will be available in late 2008. The 2007 NCHRP Report 574 is a guidebook on highway cost estimation management and project cost estimation procedures that aim for consistency and accuracy between long-range transportation planning, priority programming, and preconstruction cost estimates. This guide provides strategies, methods, and tools to develop, track and document realistic cost estimates.

Another NCHRP study that is currently underway will develop a model showing how right of way elements can be incorporated into an enterprise GIS. It is anticipated that the NCHRP report will be finalized in 2009. The model being developed can be used by State DOTs when considering ways to integrate geo-spatial components into right of way data management systems. In 2007, the FHWA used STEP funds to bring together several state DOTs to discuss the state of the practice for integrating GIS and right of way. Fiscal year 2008 STEP funds will be used for a follow-up peer exchange to encourage further integration.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE HIGHWAY AND TRANSPORTATION OFFICIALS (AASHTO) RESEARCH

Stakeholders can also request the AASHTO Right of Way and Utility Subcommittee to support right of way related research. For example, the AASHTO formed a group of state DOT, LPA and FHWA officials to develop specifications for a software product to calculate relocation benefits. In April 2007, AASHTO announced the availability of a request for information (RFI) for a potential AASHTOWare® product to be developed through its cooperative software development program. Interested software development firms were asked to respond to the RFI, with a statement of qualifications as well as non-binding cost estimates. If the AASHTO member agencies agree to fund the development of the project, only firms responding to the RFI are eligible to respond to the request for proposal. The proposed project, Turbo Relocation™, is a software solution which will address an emerging need to automate relocation calculations that can be used by any agency or its contractors in implementing the requirements of the Uniform Act. If state DOTs are interested in contributing funds to this effort, they are encouraged to contact Tony Bianchi at tbianchi@ashto.org.

FHWA, AASHTO AND THE TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD (TRB)

The FHWA, AASHTO and TRB have combined to fund an International Scan in 2008, Integrating and Streamlining Right of Way and Utility Processes with Planning, Environment and Design. Gerald Solomon, director of the Office of Real Estate Services, and John Campbell, Right-of-Way Director for the Texas DOT, are co-chairs for the scan. A similar international scan (featured in the May/June 2003 issue of IRWA's Right of Way magazine) conducted in 2000 contributed to several State DOT pilot projects, including the development of innovative methods and revised guidance by the FHWA. Ideas for research that resulting from the scan can be considered for future STEP funds.

TIMING FOR SUBMISSIONS

The STEP research program is vital to the FHWA in order to carry out a variety of realty program management and OAC related research efforts. As priorities and practices change, it is vital that stakeholders continue to contribute additional ideas and topics.

While it is anticipated that the deadline for submitting fiscal year 2009 topics will be toward the end of August 2008, stakeholders are encouraged to check the website FHWA STEP for updates. For additional information, please contact Carolyn James at carolyn.james@dot.gov.

CONCLUSION

The measure of our success is determined by the extent to which our stakeholders take the initiative to submit research proposals for realty and outdoor advertising control topics for the next fiscal year.

In order to be responsive to current needs, stakeholders are encouraged to visit the FHWA STEP website and submit topics. Since funding is limited, any additional background information or explanation of the research problem will help the panel as they review and prioritize submissions. In 2007, numerous quality submissions were received, and the FHWA looks forward to a greater number of submissions in the future.

All topics can be submitted to the "Feedback" section, using the Environment category called Outdoor Advertising Control/Realty Program Management. Additional details on the STEP process, timing for stakeholders to submit proposed research topics and projects that have been selected for funding is available online at www.fhwa.dot.gov/hep/step/index.htm.