

Simplifying the Use of Federal-Aid

New website helps local public agencies manage their highway projects.

BY STEVE MOLER



Locally administered projects, such as the seismic retrofit of the Golden Gate Bridge connecting San Francisco and Marin County, CA, make up about 15 percent of all Federal-aid projects nationwide.

In the United States, local public agencies own and operate the vast majority of the nation's local roads. They are responsible for about three million miles of roads, roughly 75 percent of the overall system, as well as more than half of the nation's bridges. In building and maintaining these roads and bridges, these agencies can use a variety of funding sources, including the Federal-aid Highway Program.

Of the nearly 28,000 local public agencies in the United States, each year an estimated 7,000 of them are actively managing about \$7 billion in Federal-aid projects, roughly 15 percent of the total funding program. Projects can range from sidewalks and pavement overlays to complex interchanges and bridges. To ensure the successful delivery of federally-funded projects at the local level, understanding the Federal-aid requirements is critical. Non-compliance can lead to project delays and local public agencies not receiving timely reimbursements.

Maintaining Compliance

When agencies receive Federal-aid funding, they begin working closely with their respective state department of transportation to meet all Federal-aid requirements. To help facilitate the process, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) recently launched a new information-sharing initiative called Federal-aid Essentials for Local Public Agencies that offers information about all key aspects of the Federal-aid program on a single public website.

The new Federal-aid Essentials website features a resource library of more than 80 short informational videos that are professionally narrated in non-technical language and supported with engaging graphics and animation to deliver the most essential content. Each video averages about 10 minutes and focuses on a single topic in the most critical areas of Federal-aid. Users have access to a wealth of companion materials, including a printable script of each video, the applicable Code of Federal Regulations, helpful reference information and links to additional online resources. The viewers will acquire enough knowledge to know what questions to ask their State DOT counterparts, what appropriate technical terminology to use and how and where to access additional assistance. The videos are especially useful in meetings, training and on job sites when meeting with project teams, stakeholders and partners.

An Emerging Need

The need for a centralized resource surfaced after a series of FHWA internal reviews and risk assessments revealed gaps in local public agency oversight of projects, which in some cases, resulted in noncompliance. Most information about the Federal-aid program had been scattered among various websites and manuals, and it was clear that the transportation community needed a central repository of fundamental policies, procedures and guidance.

In early 2011, FHWA officials formed a development team for the Federal-aid Essentials project. The team envisioned an innovative delivery system that would target a vast audience, provide concise and consistent information, and be available on demand.

After determining that web-based training modules were too long and complicated, the team shifted focus to an information-sharing website and resource library concept based loosely on the Khan Academy, a nonprofit educational organization that offers thousands of online instructional videos. Michael Smith, a Project Management Engineer with the FHWA Resource Center had been using the Khan Academy model in preparing other FHWA training courses. Once he showed the project team some samples of the brief introductory videos, they all agreed that it was the best approach.

FHWA assembled a team of subject matter experts, content managers, script writers and production specialists to create the videos. To ensure that the videos would meet the needs of local public agencies, the FHWA initiated a series of activities to assess the quality and utility of the Federal-aid Essentials materials and obtain feedback from various State and local roads representatives. In November 2011, during the project's early development, FHWA formed a focus group of six representatives from local public agencies selected from across the country, two staffers from State DOTs, and two representatives from the Local and Tribal Technical Assistance Programs, a national network of 58 centers that delivers training, information, and technical assistance to the local roads community.

FHWA used information from the focus group, advisory group, internal reviews and risk assessments to determine the seven video categories. Specific videos within each category were developed to address the various aspects of the Federal-aid program, including disadvantaged business enterprises, the Americans with Disabilities Act, project closeout, Buy America Act, quality assurance, value engineering, the National Environmental Policy Act and internal financial controls, to name a few. Each video can be updated if needed, and new videos will be added over time to accommodate new policies and regulations and to meet State DOT and local public agency needs. As the



The Georgia Department of Transportation used \$20.4 million in Federal-aid and state funding for the McGinnis Ferry Road extension in Gwinnett County, GA.

summer 2012 launch date neared, FHWA continued to engage state and local partners in refining and improving the initiative's materials. For example, the FHWA sponsored four town hall webinars during which 145 representatives reviewed and provided feedback on the Federal-aid Essentials materials.

Some states have updated or published new guidance manuals for local public agencies, and these are now accessible as companion materials on the FHWA website. Further, some states are encouraging local public agencies to use checklists for tracking project milestones and to hold early and frequent project meetings. The Nebraska Department of Roads (NDOR), for example, recently put several improvements in place, including updating and expanding its LPA Guidelines Manual for Federal-aid projects, developing checklists for each focus area, and delivering classroom and web-based training. NDOR also revamped its website to improve access to information and guidance on state and Federal regulations, including state stewardship agreements, downloadable forms and guidelines for disadvantaged business enterprises.

The Federal-aid Essentials initiative and recent State DOT efforts are steps toward helping the transportation community pursue better, faster, and smarter ways of delivering the Federal-aid program, with the overall goal of ensuring a strong, safe infrastructure serving the public interest.

To view the resources available, please visit www.fhwa.dot.gov/federal-aidessentials.

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