



TRANSPORTATION AGENCY FOR MONTEREY COUNTY

Memorandum

To: Todd Muck, Deputy Executive Director

From: Virginia Murillo, Assistant Transportation Planner

Subject: **National Environmental Policy Act Essentials Training**

On June 20th, I attended the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Essentials Training workshop at the Santa Clara Valley Water District in San Jose. The workshop was hosted by the Association for Environmental Professionals, which is an association of public and private sector environmental planning professionals. Transportation projects implemented by the Transportation Agency for Monterey County, as well as partner agencies' non-transportation land use developments reviewed by the Transportation Agency require compliance with NEPA when the project seeks or has Federal funding. The workshop improved my understanding about the NEPA process and current trends in NEPA, which will assist me with document review and project development.

A panel of experts, which included an environmental planner and a scientist from a consulting firm and a planner from a Federal agency taught the workshop sessions. The workshop began with an overview of NEPA's purpose and the overall Federal environmental review framework. Prior to NEPA, Federal agencies did not generally coordinate with other agencies, and did not involve the public or consider the environmental impacts during project development. Signed into law in 1970, NEPA established our national policy for environmental responsibility and created a requirement for federal agencies to consider the environment and involve the public in project development and the overall decision-making process.

The first sessions were about determining whether NEPA applies, and determining which type of NEPA document is required. NEPA applies to actions that Federal agencies conduct, assist with, finance or approve. Such Federal actions that are subject to NEPA include policy decisions, land management plans, and project construction. The type of NEPA document required depends on the complexity of the Federal action. Categorical Exclusion NEPA documents require a lower level of analysis, as these types of actions cause no significant environmental impacts. On the other hand, Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Statement documents are required when Federal actions will significantly impact the environment. These sessions were useful in gaining an understanding about the first step in the Federal environmental review process, and in highlighting other scenarios in which NEPA applies.

Several sessions of the workshop proved to be of specific interest to the work TAMC does, including:

- NEPA Document Preparation and Review: This session included information about the different types of Environmental Impact Statements and provided an overview of agency roles along with the document preparation process.
- NEPA Document Purpose and Need Content: Course instructors emphasized the importance of having a well-defined statement of purpose and need that describes the objectives of the proposed action and the broader underlying social and/or agency need to which the agency is responding. The description of the proposed action must also state why the document does not include analysis of other alternatives.
- Integrating NEPA with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA): NEPA regulations require integration with other environmental laws, such as the Endangered Species Act and the state environmental laws like the CEQA. The process for preparing environmental documents under NEPA and CEQA are very similar, and can save agencies time in the environmental review process. However, the preparation of a joint document must be well coordinated, and environmental impact analyses and mitigation measures need to be consistent and need to meet requirements of both laws.

The content of the NEPA training was very relevant, as I am currently assisting with the development of the NEPA document for the Rail Extension to Monterey County project.

The NEPA workshop was well attended by professionals from the private and public sector from around the Monterey Bay Area. We also were able to meet professionals from the Bay Area that may be useful contacts in the future. More importantly, the NEPA workshop provided me with more technical project management skills that will be of use in future Transportation Agency projects.