

VII. COMMENT AND COORDINATION

I. COMMENT AND COORDINATION

A. Public Involvement

Public involvement was developed and implemented by the NJDOT for this project. The intent of the public involvement was to optimize the level of communication with the general public, appropriate governmental agencies and officials, and team members, and to coordinate the public awareness activities with the entire process. Information pertaining to the project has been shared, presented, and made available for review and comments. Ideas, concerns, and recommendations from the public were considered and addressed appropriately.

The development of alternatives for the proposed design included ongoing coordination with local public officials. Letters, fact sheets, and flyers were used to announce the proposed project as it developed, including a presentation before the City Council and a Public Information Center. In accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality Regulation (CEQR), requests were made for information and responses were solicited from relevant agencies regarding particular environmental issues of concern.

The urban conditions and demographic characteristics of the residents in the project area require that a meaningful communication process be undertaken in order to involve those residents considered to be members of special population groups, i.e., minority and low-income.

Based on the demographic characteristics of the local population, a public involvement and public notification plan was developed by the New Jersey Department of Transportation, Office of Community Relations, to ensure that appropriate local public input and participation take place in the review of the Draft Environmental Assessment. The public involvement program and public notification plan was developed to ensure compliance with the intent and objectives of Executive Order No. 12858, Environmental Justice, and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

On June 23, 2000, a Public Information Center (PIC) was held at the World Impact building. Prior to this meeting, NJDOT send announcements to residents and businesses located within the project corridor, city officials (see Appendix C). A total of 46 people attended the PIC. During the PIC, attendees had the opportunity to review the proposed project design and to ask questions of NJDOT officials and project consultants that were present. Residents attending the PIC primarily inquired about the anticipated impact of the project on their places of residence or business, the project schedule, and relocation benefits. Residents indicated that high traffic volume and speeding vehicles adversely affect the quality of life along First Street, especially with regard to pedestrian safety. Residents attending the PIC also indicated a desire to move away from the busy traffic corridor.

The project mailing list has been continually updated as the project team has been apprised of new stakeholders, including property owners, residents, business operators, and other interested parties.

A bi-lingual newsletter was circulated in the Winter of 2002 to keep stakeholders apprised of the activities since the PIC. The newsletter included an overview of the project, project needs, and maps of existing conditions and the Recommended Alternative. In addition, a summary of major project activities and a schedule for completion of the project were provided.

A public hearing will be held following the release of this Environmental Assessment. The hearing will be announced in a timely manner upon document approval. The hearing will be transcribed, and verbal and written statements from the public and governmental entities during and after the comment period will be appropriately addressed and summarized. The early coordination, public involvement, and project development will be conducted in accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations, 40 CFR 1502.20 and FHWA 23 CFR 771.111, and the latest NJDOT procedures and regulations.

B. Agency Input

Agency coordination was accomplished through a widely distributed request for input that was mailed to potentially affected public agencies and organizations. Mailings were sent to request information about the affected environment and to invite comments on potential social, economic, or environmental impacts of the proposed project on resources and issues of concern. All responses were considered and incorporated, to the extent possible, in the preparation of this EA.

Early coordination with appropriate agencies was initiated to solicit their views and to assure adequate environmental analysis/documentation and related environmental requirements. Requests for information were solicited from agencies according to the agency mailing list (see Appendix B). Notice of Planned Action (NOPA) letters were distributed to the appropriate agencies on May 23, 2000. Agency coordination will continue through formal and informal contact during project development. Coordination will also continue as the project is further advanced. All agency responses are discussed within the document in their appropriate sections, and are provided in Appendices A, F, and G.

C. Municipal Input

The NJDOT held several meetings with officials of the City of Newark. Newark officials gave their full support to the proposed project with a few minor revisions. To address the issues raised by Newark officials, the NJDOT has made minor modifications to the project's design. Newark officials also made assurances to expedite the process where possible. A copy of the City of Newark resolution is provided in Appendix E.

A meeting was held in the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) offices in February 1999. The proposed project design and the environmental review process for the project were presented and discussed. The proposed project was deemed an existing bottleneck, and therefore, exempt from the requirements for a Congestion Management Systems study.