

I-78/WEST PEDDIE STREET RAMPS REALIGNMENT PROJECT: USING THE FEDERAL FUNCTIONAL REPLACEMENT PROGRAM

New Jersey Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration

Effective Practice:

- Relocating functionally obsolete school facility located adjacent to heavily traveled highway access ramps to improve pedestrian safety and expedite highway ramp improvements.

Participants:

- New Jersey Department of Transportation
- Federal Highway Administration
- The City of Newark and Newark Public Schools
- The North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority
- State of New Jersey Department of Education
- Belmont-Runyon Elementary School Parent-Teacher Association
- Interfaith Clergy Alliance

Description

When constructed in the late 1960s, the Interstate 78 (I-78) West Peddie Street ramps in Newark, New Jersey were only intended as temporary structures to be removed once the NJ 75 Freeway (NJ 75) was built. Planned as a regional connector linking I-78 and Interstate 280, NJ 75 was intended to divert regional truck traffic off neighborhood streets. However, this highway was strongly

opposed by minority communities in several of the City's neighborhoods. The proposed NJ 75 project, a two-mile stretch slicing through dense urban neighborhoods in Newark's South and Central Ward, threatened to be costly and disruptive with substantial right-of-way acquisition, condemnation and relocation costs.

In the late 1970s, after it became apparent that that NJ 75 was not going to be further advanced, the *Newark Highway Access Feasibility Study* examined alternative ramp configurations in the vicinity of I-78/West Peddie Street as well as interim improvements to channel regional traffic and address pedestrian safety issues. In 1984, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared, based on these recommendations, by the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) and approved by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Although the intent was to improve traffic flow, remove truck traffic from residential streets, and address pedestrian safety problems, no alternative was implemented due to a lack of funding and because no consensus could be reached on a particular alternative.

Newark's South Ward residents always objected to the speeding regional traffic spilling onto local neighborhood streets, but were particularly concerned that the ramps' configuration posed a continuing threat to the safety of children attending the nearby Belmont-Runyon Elementary School. Situated in one of Newark's poorest neighborhoods, the school reports an enrollment that is 100 percent minority, 96 percent of whom participate in the free-lunch program.

The worst fears of local community residents were realized in March, 1997. Eight-year-old, Terrell James, was struck



and killed by a hit-and-run motorist, a teenager, who apparently regularly journeyed from his distant Jersey shore suburb to Newark to purchase heroin. The motorist, traveling with several friends in his black mustang, was making his way home through the 3rd grader's neighborhood, past the Belmont-Runyon school, toward the I-78 ramps when the incident occurred.

The hit-and-run death spurred community protests including a weekly vigil organized by an alliance of local clergy at the scene of the boy's death. This protest and other activities prompted several responses by state and local officials. The Newark Police began—with varied degrees of success—to crack down on speeding and other traffic violations as well as drug trafficking. City officials in cooperation with the Newark Public Schools and NJDOT relocated a playground away from the highway ramps. The City also created a truck route and installed traffic control measures such as rumble strips, pedestrian crossings, and turning restrictions in the interim. Additionally, State legislators drafted “Terrell’s Law”, a proposed New Jersey Law—not yet passed—prohibiting the construction of a school and a highway ramp within 1,000 feet of each other.

For its part, NJDOT hastened to streamline the project development process, expediting new engineering and environmental studies to reconfigure the I-78 ramps. NJDOT agreed at the request of the City of Newark to consider ramp realignment and intersection improvements. The recommended design improvements required geometric changes to the ramps that



necessitated the relocation of the existing elementary school to a new site, approximately two blocks away. The FHWA and NJDOT also allocated funds for the long-needed relocation of the elementary school to a nearby vacant tract. In the aftermath of the tragedy, the local MPO, the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA), assisted in the outreach processes at a time when community distrust was particularly great. Meetings at the NJTPA were held with community leaders and members of the public to explore design solutions that would address neighborhood concerns.

The Federal Functional Replacement Program (FFRP) became a key tool for surmounting long-standing constraints to project implementation that involved the need to relocate the elementary school. Federal funding was earmarked for the acquisition, relocation and replacement of the elementary school away from the I-78 access ramps. The FFRP program will pay the necessary cost to replace a publicly-owned facility with a similar facility that offers the same utility, *including betterments and enlargements required by present-day local laws, codes, and reasonable prevailing standards for similar facilities in the area* (see 23 CFR 710.509). To date, approximately \$16 million of federal funding has been allocated for the relocation of the elementary school. A new EA was completed by May 2000 with a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) issued by the FHWA by September 2000. The project is now in its Final Design stage and construction is expected to commence once the school has been relocated and occupied.

Benefits

For the Agencies:

- Diverts regional “through” traffic and truck traffic away from the community.
- Replaces what were intended to be temporary ramps yet have been in place for over 30 years.

For the Community:

- Replaces a physically and functionally deficient elementary school and separates regional traffic from the vicinity of the elementary school.

Lessons Learned

Observation of the process and interviews with key players have revealed the following:

- A galvanized community is a powerful political force and can act as a catalyst for action.
- The FFRP is an important and creative tool for transportation *and* community planners seeking to redress long-standing problems in low-income and minority communities—areas often burdened by aging or obsolete community facilities and poorly designed and intrusively located transportation systems.
- Local communities have a difficult time understanding the operating boundaries between state and local government. Early stakeholder identification and the introduction of a Citizen Advisory Committee comprised of government officials and local citizens served to foster greater awareness and understanding of the roles, responsibilities and interrelationships between the various government agencies involved in the project.

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... b) **Federal participation.** Federal-aid funds may participate in functional replacement costs only if:

- (1) Functional replacement is permitted under State law and the State Transportation Department (STD) elects to provide it.
- (2) The property in question is in public ownership and use.
- (3) The replacement facility will be in public ownership and will continue the public use function of the acquired facility.
- (4) The State has informed the agency owning the property of its right to an estimate of just compensation based on an appraisal of fair market value and of the option to choose either just compensation or functional replacement.
- (5) The FHWA concurs in the STD determination that functional replacement is in the public interest.
- (6) The real property is not owned by a utility or railroad.

— excerpted from CFR 710.509, Functional replacement of real property in public ownership
