

Hear Every Voice

Case Study: US 17 Community Impact Assessment Process



Development of a Community Impact Assessment (CIA) for US17 road improvements.

US Highway 17 between New Bern and Jacksonville, North Carolina

North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT)

Project Details

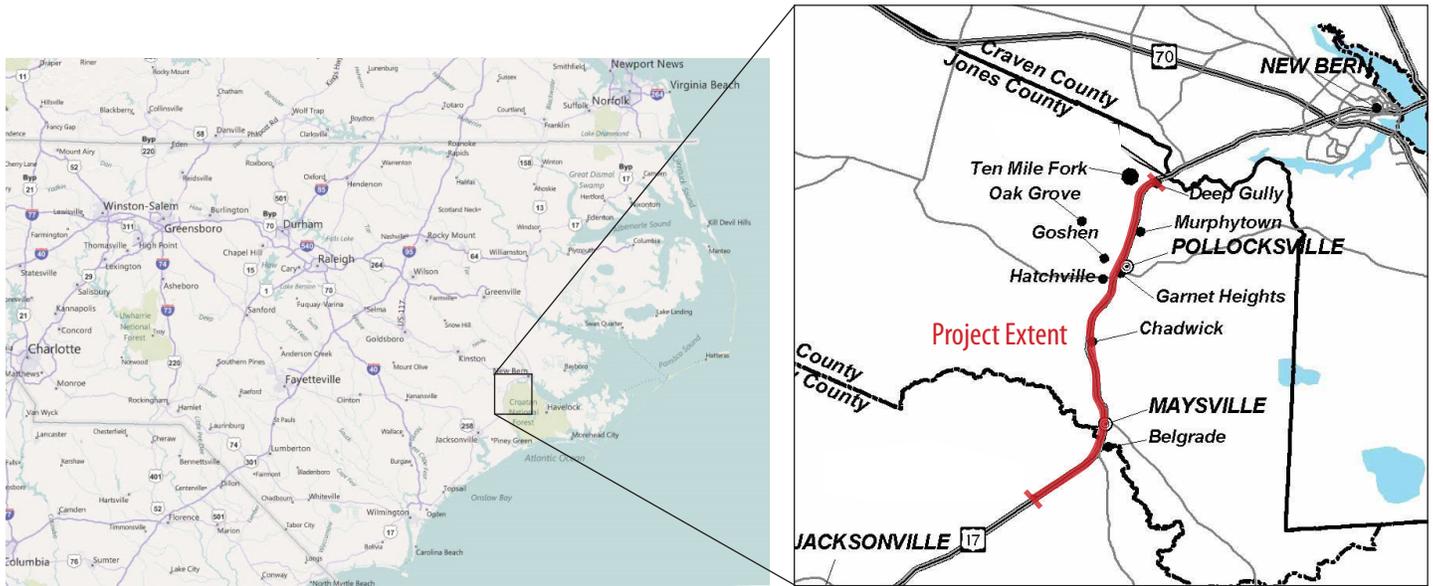
Location

Organizations

Context: In the late 1990s, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) was considering options for expansion of US Highway 17, which runs southeast from the Outer Banks through Wilmington to the South Carolina border. The potential options were to upgrade it from a two-lane rural road to a five-lane roadway in the existing location or to relocate the segment as a four-lane divided roadway in a new location. Five years after the initiation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to assess the impacts of road improvements to US 17, NCDOT authorized preparation of a Community Impact Assessment (CIA). The CIA was initiated to examine potential impacts of project alternatives on four nearby African-American communities. After the initial CIA was submitted and reviewed, NCDOT expanded the scope of the CIA to include an additional seven communities along the corridor.

Case Summary

Meeting Activity



source: <http://www.bing.com>

source: Morris, A. 2003.

Public Involvement: Public engagement during the EIS phase of the project consisted of two public involvement workshops, periodic newsletters, and a toll-free hotline. These efforts did not engage the community as well as NCDOT had hoped, so the CIA was initiated. As the CIA began, NCDOT was aware that it needed to be more innovative in its efforts to truly reach residents.

The 16.1-mile segment of US 17 transects a number of low-income, low-literacy communities (Morris 2003). “These economic and literacy barriers meant that access to traditional public involvement tools such as websites and newspapers was beyond the financial reach of many families” (Morris 2003, 1).

During the CIA process, numerous engagement techniques were used in effort to reach community members, from one-on-one interviews to community meetings. In addition, an innovative approach to connecting with young students—as a means of also reaching parents—was employed to increase participation in the project. This case study focuses on school and student outreach as a public engagement technique.

During the CIA process, the project analyst connected with two key community leaders: the principals of Maysville and Pollocksville Elementary Schools. Both schools were located in proximity to US 17 and included students who were predominantly from the corridor area (Morris 2003, 2). The principals were able to provide current demographic information about their students, which was helpful to better understand the demographic composition of the neighborhoods. More than 60 percent of the students were identified as racial minorities, and 83 percent were eligible for the USDA’s Free and Reduced Meal Program. Additionally, based on the relationship between low-income, low-educational attainment, and literacy levels, the principals estimated that 30-40 percent of student parents were semi-literate or illiterate (Morris 2003, 2).

“...NCDOT realized that the old ways were not working. As a result, openness and flexibility led to unusual coalitions that provided opportunities for all segments [of the population] to be involved and engage in the decision-making process” (Morris, 6).

In conversation with the principal of Pollocksville Elementary School, the project analyst was asked to and subsequently gave a presentation to fourth- and fifth-graders about roads in general and the project specifically (Morris, 3). Titled “Where Do Roads Come From,” the presentation was designed to illustrate the complexity of siting roads. Prior to the classroom presentations, the project analyst “tested” the presentation on a NCDOT employee’s 10-year-old son to ensure there was no confusing technical jargon and the presentation was tailored to the appropriate age.

During the presentation, the project analyst described various parts of the road siting process: the numerous professionals involved, important environmental considerations, and complex cultural considerations. After the basic presentation, all students were given a map of the town of Pollocksville, with Pollocksville Elementary School highlighted to orient the students to their location. Various considerations in selecting a road alignment, such as the locations of wetlands, floodplains, and cultural resources, were indicated on the map in different colors. The map—titled “Where do you think the new road should go?”—was intended to get the students and their parents to think about where US 17 should be sited. Students were asked to talk

with their parents about what they learned in the classroom presentation, draw a preferred location of the road on the map, and return the sheet signed by both the student and the parents the following day (Morris 2004). To encourage students to complete the exercise, students were told they would receive a "Junior Environmentalist" certificate. Fifty-eight of 60 students returned their sheets.

Student Worksheet

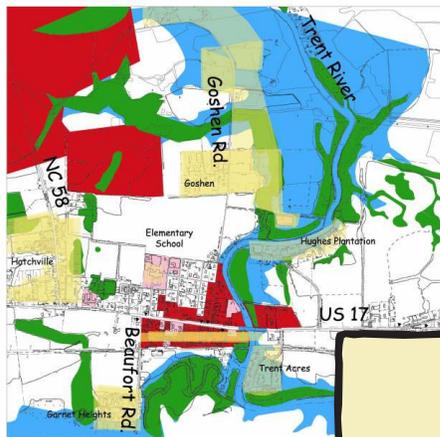
Where do you think the new road should go?

Be careful of the neighborhoods, the wetlands, the Historic areas, floodplains and communities facilities.

Tell your parents why you chose your new road's location.

Parent's signature _____

Student's signature _____



Student Certificate

Pollocksville Elementary School



CERTIFICATE

of Participation in

"Where Do Roads Come From?"

Awarded to



source: Morris, A. 2003.

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Because of the success of the presentation and map exercise, NCDOT recognized the potential of working with schools to increase their ability to reach community members who often do not attend public meetings and workshops. The experience with Pollocksville Elementary School has helped to broaden NCDOT's engagement of low-literacy populations. It has also served as a catalyst for NCDOT to be more innovative in their approach to public involvement.

Morris, A. 2003. Utilizing students to overcome economic and literacy barriers to public participation. Retrieved from http://environment.transportation.org/pdf/environmental_justice/Utilizing_Students_to_Overcome_Economic_and_Literacy_Barriers_to_Public_Participation.pdf (TRB 2004 Annual Meeting)

North Carolina Department of Transportation. 2001. Lessons learned in preparing the US 17 community impact assessment. Retrieved from http://www.ciatrans.net/us17_Lessons_Learned.pdf.

References

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