

31. Public Outreach

31.1. Introduction

Section 6002 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU 6002), enacted August 10, 2005, requires lead agencies to develop a plan for coordination of public and agency participation during the environmental review process. The purpose of the coordination plan is to facilitate and document the lead agency's structured interaction with the public and other agencies and to inform the public and other agencies of how the coordination will be carried out. The intention is to expedite and improve the environmental review process by clearly outlining the coordination process. The Coordination Plan is in Appendix J.

Furthermore, the DEIS process as defined by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires the incorporation of public feedback during initial scoping and again during the DEIS hearing and comment periods. These two outreach periods are important, as they provide an opportunity for the public to provide vital input to the direction of the project and then review the outcome of their initial input, but experience has proven that in study areas that support a highly motivated community and in areas of significant population density, a well-developed public outreach strategy that exceeds the minimum NEPA requirements is essential. Located in one of the most densely populated counties in the nation, supporting an active community of involved residents and business owners, the Northern Branch Corridor study area represents a combination of characteristics requiring a comprehensive public outreach program.

The following sections describe the outreach activities to date, which lead up to but do not include the DEIS hearing. Public comments submitted during the DEIS review period and at the DEIS hearing will be incorporated into the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Northern Branch project. The steps involved in the NEPA public involvement process are as follows:

1. **Notice of Intent (NOI)** – The sponsoring agency posts the NOI in the Federal Register. The NOI provides some basic information on the proposed action. The public and interested agencies are invited to submit comments and questions regarding the NOI.
2. **Scoping** – The sponsoring agency and study team hosts a public meeting or meetings (depending on the size of the proposed project) to define the scope of issues to be addressed in the DEIS. Public contribution during this period helps to identify areas of concern to the local community.
3. **Interim Outreach** – While NEPA does not require additional outreach between the Scoping and Draft EIS phases, most agencies have found that additional outreach to the affected community is beneficial in identifying and resolving a variety of local concerns regarding the project.
4. **Draft Environmental Impact Statement** – The DEIS document is developed based on an examination of the study area and analyses concerning the potential impacts of the proposed project. The DEIS is published for public review and comment for a period of no less than 45 days. The Notice of Availability of the DEIS is published in the Federal Register and in newspapers circulated in the study area. Copies of the DEIS are made available in local libraries and/or at municipal buildings. During the public comment period at least one public hearing is held. During this time, members of the public are invited to raise questions about DEIS content to the sponsoring agency and study team. The answers to the questions are not given during the hearing, but are incorporated in the FEIS. Written comments are also

accepted during the comment period. Attendance at the hearing is not required to submit a comment for consideration in the development of the FEIS.

- 5. Final Environmental Impact Statement Development** – The comments submitted by the public and agencies during the DEIS comment period are reviewed and incorporated in the FEIS. The FEIS details the preferred alternative and any changes made to the project as a result of the comments raised during the DEIS review period. Although not required by regulation, additional outreach may be conducted during the FEIS phase to clarify issues and concerns raised by the public and agencies during the DEIS comment period.

A response to comments document is also drafted during this time. The response to comments document itemizes all comments received and notes how the comment, question, or recommendation was addressed. Not all comments submitted are necessarily relevant to the project or require modification of the DEIS. Comments that warrant a change to the document are so noted. The response to comments document becomes part of the FEIS.

When the FEIS is complete, another Notice of Availability is published in the Federal Register. While the public is welcome to comment on the FEIS, comments received during the FEIS review period typically are not incorporated into the document. The FEIS review period, which requires a minimum of 30 days, is intended to allow the sponsoring agency and partners time to consider the FEIS and the implications of the proposed project.

- 6. Record of Decision (ROD)** – The agencies involved in the development of the FEIS issue a statement that summarizes the alternatives considered, mitigation plans, and monitoring commitments, and how to proceed with the proposed project. The ROD is available for public review.

31.2. Public Involvement Project History

The Northern Branch Corridor DEIS began in 1996 as a continuation of the *West Shore Region Study*, which examined transit options from a regional perspective and included the track segment referred to today as the Northern Branch. Between 1997 and 1999 the West Shore Region public outreach program was implemented to inform the public and elected officials of the purpose of the study, explain the transportation alternatives under consideration, describe the evaluation of alternatives, and detail the environmental review activities.

At the time of the West Shore study, the Northern Branch portion of the network was assumed to be an extension of the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail (HBLR) system, which was expected to terminate at the Vince Lombardi Park-Ride on the NJ Turnpike. The outreach effort was based on this assumption; consequently, the alternative recommended for the Northern Branch Corridor in the *West Shore Alternatives Analysis Report* (Edwards and Kelcey, 1999) was a light rail system to Tenafly.

Electric light rail-based alternatives were discussed publicly during the initial 2001 scoping process for the Northern Branch Project, and the alternative presented in the 1999 *Alternatives Analysis Report* was included as “Combined Alternative #2” in the *Northern Branch Corridor MIS/DEIS Final Scoping Document*, released in December 2001.

Shortly after the release of the 2001 Scoping Document, the HBLR MOS II was redefined and a new terminal station identified at Tonnelle Avenue in North Bergen instead of 85th Street. The new terminal was located south of the existing North Bergen freight rail yard and eliminated the need for avoidance measures to keep the light rail vehicle separated from freight trains (see Chapter 22: Safety and Security for a discussion of FRA compliance and safety requirements).

The lack of an HBLR connection through the North Bergen freight rail yard presented new challenges to the Northern Branch project, which up to this point was expected to provide a service similar to the existing HBLR, seamlessly integrating the HBLR with Northern Branch service at a location in North Bergen, without a transfer. While this integration was still possible, it presented technical and financial obstacles that threatened to compromise the cost-effectiveness of the project. NJ TRANSIT decided to reevaluate the Northern Branch alternatives.

As described in the project history section of Chapter 1, the development of an FRA-compliant DMU vehicle in 2002 presented a solution to the Northern Branch problem of providing passenger rail service through the freight yard and on tracks shared with active freight service. The Northern Branch project was consequently revised, replacing the initially-proposed light rail service with the DMU service that would not interfere with existing freight activities on the Northern Branch. Outreach efforts beginning in October 2004 and carrying through mid-2006 focused on introducing the DMU alternative to the study area's elected officials and stakeholders.

In response to feedback from the public and elected officials representing the study area, a new scoping initiative re-introduced the project with four alternatives representing two different vehicle modes— light rail and DMU. Outreach efforts through 2007 focused on the merits of each mode of transit, eliciting feedback from the communities that would be served by the proposed project, and culminating in the analysis presented in this DEIS document.

31.3. Public Outreach Activities

31.3.1. Scoping

The purpose of the scoping process is to provide opportunity for the public and agencies to comment on and provide input to the DEIS as it is initiated. Scoping begins with the publication of a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare a DEIS in the *Federal Register*.

31.3.1.1. 2001 Scoping Effort

The NOI for the Northern Branch Corridor DEIS appeared in the *Federal Register*, Volume 66, Number 117, on Monday, June 18, 2001, pages 32867 and 32868.

A Draft Scoping Document (June 2001) was prepared as part of the scoping process to provide information to the public and agencies on the DEIS process, issues, alternatives and methodologies. The Draft Scoping Document for the Northern Branch Corridor DEIS component of the combination alternative was mailed to pertinent federal, state, and local agencies and was provided upon request to other interested parties. Comments on the Draft Scoping Document were taken orally at public scoping meetings, or in writing throughout the scoping process. The formal scoping comment period closed on August 15, 2001. A Final Scoping Document (December 2001) was prepared as a revision to the Draft Scoping Document, based on the comments received from the public and agencies during the scoping process.

Agency and public scoping meetings were held to review the study scope and approach and to receive comments and suggestions for consideration from agencies and the general public. Both groups were asked to comment on the purpose and need for the Northern Branch Corridor improvements, on the study's goals and objectives, alternatives to be evaluated, social, economic or environmental issues of concern, and the proposed public participation program. The general public and interest groups were invited via various advertising and outreach mechanisms, and federal, state, and local agencies were invited by letter to participate in the scoping process.

The agency scoping meeting for the West Shore Region EIS projects, including the Northern Branch Corridor DEIS, was held:

Monday, July 9, 2001

10 a.m. to 12 p.m.

NJ TRANSIT Headquarters, 9th Floor Board Room

One Penn Plaza East, Newark, New Jersey 07105

The public scoping meeting specifically for the Northern Branch Corridor DEIS was held:

Wednesday, July 11, 2001

3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.

John Harms Center for the Arts, Theater

30 North Van Brunt Street

Englewood, New Jersey 07631

In addition, public scoping meetings were held on other Corridor DEIS's that were also part of the West Shore Region network.

Scoping meetings for the West Shore Corridor DEIS were held:

Thursday July 12, 2001

3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Orangetown Town Hall

Courtroom

26 Orangeburg Road

Orangeburg, New York 10962

Wednesday July 18, 2001

3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Teaneck Recreation Center

2nd Floor Multi-Purpose Room

250 Colonial Court

Teaneck, New Jersey 07666

Scoping meetings for the Bergen – Passaic Cross County Corridor DEIS were held:

Tuesday, July 10, 2001

3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Bergen County Administration Building

Freeholders Room, 5th Floor

1 Bergen County Plaza

Hackensack, New Jersey 07601

Tuesday, July 17, 2001

3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Passaic County Administration Building

Freeholders Room, Room 223

401 Grand Street

Paterson, New Jersey 07505

31.3.1.2. 2007 Scoping Effort

The 2007 scoping effort focused specifically on the Northern Branch project, but followed a process similar to that conducted for the 2001 scoping. The Draft Scoping Document was published in October 2007, and described revised alternatives consisting of two vehicle modes and two different terminal locations. The NOI was published in *Federal Register*, Volume 72, Number 190, on Tuesday, October 2, 2007, pages 56123 and 56126. As with the 2001 scoping, general notices were provided on the project website, and letters were drafted for agency stakeholders.

The general scoping meetings were held:

*Wednesday, October 24, 2007
3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Crowne Plaza Englewood Hotel
401 S. Van Brunt St.
Englewood, NJ 07631*

Registration to speak at the general public scoping meeting began at 2:30 p.m. and remained open until 4:30 p.m. for the afternoon session; registration to speak began at 6:30 p.m. and remained open until 8:30 p.m. for the evening session.

Information and scoping materials were posted on the project website <http://NorthernBranchCorridor.com>. Additionally, interested parties were able to post questions and/or sign up for the mailing list on the website.

The agency scoping meeting for the Northern Branch Corridor EIS was held:

*Wednesday, December 19, 2007
1:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.
NJ TRANSIT Headquarters
One Penn Plaza East
Newark, NJ 07105*

The formal scoping comment period closed on November 7, 2007. More than 175 individual comments to the scoping document were submitted by study area residents, municipal officials, and elected representatives. Comments pertaining to the scope of the DEIS as described in the Draft Scoping Document were incorporated into the Final Scoping Document. Comments of a more general nature, and comments too detailed for this preliminary stage of review, were logged and noted. The Final Scoping Document was published in March 2008. A summary of the comments received is included in the appendix to the Final Scoping Document, available under separate cover and on the project website.

31.3.2. Citizens Liaison Committee

A Citizens Liaison Committee (CLC) was developed to foster communication between municipalities in the Northern Branch corridor and the study team. Members of the Committee include mayors and their appointed representatives, town council members, citizens, and Chamber of Commerce members. Additionally, the mailing lists for the West Shore Region CLC were incorporated and members of that CLC were invited to continue their involvement with the project. At committee meetings, the study team typically presents information and updates on the study status, elicits feedback from CLC members, and notes comments and concerns for follow-up discussion at subsequent meetings. Committee meetings often involve an open house session in which attendees can informally view project materials available for display, and ask study team members questions.

CLC meetings began during the West Shore phase of the Northern Branch project development and continued through to the present. Early on, when the Northern Branch was part of the larger West Shore project, CLC meetings were held in March 1997, July 1997, May 1998, July 1998, and May 1999. Break-out sessions were used at several CLC meetings for committee members to participate in small groups to discuss specific issues related to their communities. These sessions gave committee members the opportunity to engage in conversations with each other about study issues and to speak directly with study team members. Other CLC activities included a bus tour of the West Shore Region Study Corridors in April 1997. A subcommittee of the CLC was also established, made up of committee members with a

specific interest in the Northern Branch Corridor. This subcommittee met on September 24, 2002, to discuss the details of the Northern Branch Corridor EIS Alternatives.

While not technically a CLC meeting, an open house session was held on February 22, 2006 in Tenafly to introduce the DMU alternative to the public. The meeting was attended by CLC members, local officials, and other interested parties who signed up to join the CLC and participate in the next phase of project development.

As a result of feedback received from the open house and other subsequent communication with stakeholders, combined with the impact of other transit projects as described in Chapter 3, NJ TRANSIT again revised the Northern Branch alternatives and organized a new series of meetings to describe the new alternatives to the CLC.

The first CLC meeting describing the Northern Branch Build Alternatives as they exist today was held on July 17, 2007 in Englewood. CLC members, both from the West Shore phase and new members who signed up during the 2006 open house, were notified of the meeting by letter. Approximately 45 individuals attended the meeting, which consisted of a presentation and an “open house” session where members could view study materials and ask questions.

A follow-up meeting was held on November 29, 2007 in Englewood. The purpose of the meeting was the presentation of refined station layouts and ridership and a more detailed discussion of vehicle technology and engineering issues. The meeting also discussed the scoping process and next steps. The meeting was attended by approximately 50 people.

A third meeting was held on June 30, 2008 in Englewood. The purpose of the meeting was to describe the preliminary environmental findings, discuss the changes to the Overpeck Park roadways that would affect Leonia Station, and to discuss capital costs. This meeting was also attended by approximately 50 people.

It is expected that the CLC will continue to meet throughout the environmental review process and will serve as a valuable source of comments during the DEIS public review period.

31.3.3. Technical Advisory Committee

A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) was assembled to communicate with regulatory and review agencies in the region the status of the Northern Branch DEIS. The TAC membership included representatives from Bergen County, Hudson County, CSX Transportation, Norfolk Southern Corporation, NYS&W Railway Corporation, North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, the Federal Highway Administration, the Federal Transit Administration, The Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission, NJ Department of Environmental Protection, NJ State Historic Preservation Office, NJ Department of Transportation, NJ TRANSIT, US Army Corps of Engineers, and the US Environmental Protection Agency.

TAC meetings began concurrent with the CLC meetings during the West Shore phase and have followed project development through to the present. West Shore-phase meetings were held in March 1997, July 1997, March 1998, July 1998, May 1999, and September 5, 2002. TAC members were invited to participate in the Agency Scoping meeting held in July 2001, and were given copies of the Draft Scoping Document.

The TAC members met next following the revision of the Northern Branch project to include both light rail and DMU alternatives. Members received the 2007 Draft Scoping document and were invited to attend an information meeting on December 19, 2007 at NJ TRANSIT’s headquarters in Newark. The

purpose of the meeting was to reintroduce the project, discuss the technical issues that led to the revision of alternatives, and describe the next steps in project development. It is expected that the TAC will continue to meet throughout the environmental review phase of the Northern Branch project.

31.3.4. Public Official Meetings

Although public officials and their representatives are included on the TAC and CLC, it is also important to have focused meetings with the leaders of each jurisdiction to discuss their unique needs and expectations. A series of public official meetings were conducted throughout the West Shore and Northern Branch phases of this project. Generally, the meetings were scheduled as part of an organized effort to disseminate important project information consistently to municipalities potentially affected by the Build Alternatives. In some instances the meetings have come as a result of requests from municipal leaders.

During the West Shore and early Northern Branch (LRT Alternative) phase, meetings were held with Ridgefield (August 2000, January 2002; May 2003); Palisades Park (July 2000, October 2000); Leonia (July 2000, October 2001, February 2002; November 2003); Englewood (October 2000, November 2001, January 2002); and Tenafly (September 2000, November 2001, January 2002, August 2002; June 2003; August 2003).

The introduction of the DMU alternative for the Northern Branch required a new round of outreach to municipal officials. Since the technology was new, the DMU meetings took a more interactive and educational approach, including:

- Presentation at the Bergen County Transportation Summit (October 2004)
- Presentation at a Tenafly Town Meeting, hosted by the Mayor of Tenafly and the Tenafly Rail Committee (January 2005)
- Meeting with the Business Administrator and Council representatives of Ridgefield (January 2005)
- Presentation on the Northern Branch project DMU approach at the TRANSACTION transit conference in Atlantic City, attended by transportation officials at the local, county, and state level (April 2005)
- Meeting with the Mayor of Tenafly, Tenafly Rail Committee, and Tenafly Environmental Committee (September 2005)

Additional meetings were held following the 2007 scoping period, particularly with the Bergen County Department of Parks and Leonia, regarding the potential use of a portion of Overpeck Park for Leonia Station parking and access.

In November, 2009, at the request of the Borough of Tenafly and the Tenafly Transportation Committee, a town hall meeting was held at the Tenafly High School to discuss the project with the community. A short presentation was given and then attendees were invited to ask questions of NJ TRANSIT representatives regarding the project.

31.3.5. Information Line and Website

In 1996, during the West Shore phase of the Northern Branch project, a toll-free study information telephone line was established. The phone number appeared in all study materials to encourage the public to contact the study team with questions, or to be added to the study mailing list. The study information line was disconnected in 2003. During its operation, more than one hundred inquiries were received.

With the advent of the information age and greater availability of reliable internet access, the Northern Branch transitioned to a web-based feedback system, using a project website initially hosted on NJ TRANSIT's home page, and later hosted independently. Project materials, meeting handouts and presentations, and a feedback form/email address offer a "one-stop" public information and feedback resource for study area stakeholders and the general public. The website proved particularly well-received during the latest scoping period, wherein about 40 percent of comments received were submitted via email. The website will remain updated and active through the conclusion of the FEIS of the Northern Branch project and will make available environmental documents (DEIS, FEIS, and ROD) for public review after each milestone. It can be viewed at <http://NorthernBranchCorridor.com>.

31.3.6. Newsletters

An eight-page color newsletter was distributed as an insert in newspapers throughout the study area in 1998. This insert appeared in 10 newspapers in Bergen and Rockland Counties, reaching more than 225,000 households. The newsletter explained to the public the purpose of the study, the study goals, the differences between the transportation modes under consideration, the alternatives and alignments under consideration, the importance of the project to West Shore communities, and the public involvement process. The newsletter included maps, photographs and other graphics. A second newsletter was prepared and distributed in the same fashion in 2001 as part of the scoping process. This newsletter presented the findings of the Alternatives Analysis Report, and introduced the environmental review and documentation process.

Newsletters have not been developed subsequent to the initial scoping meeting. Response during the 2007 scoping process indicate that the public and stakeholders are adequately noticed via email, letters to the Northern Branch mailing list members, and notices posted on the NJ TRANSIT and Northern Branch project websites. While electronic and personal communication is as effective as mass-mailing, it is more cost-effective and environmentally responsible.

31.3.7. Mailing List and Database

From the beginning of the Northern Branch Project, a mailing list of interested individuals, including CLC and TAC members, elected officials, agency representatives, and other stakeholders, has been maintained by the project study team. The mailing list was updated manually to remain current with changes in committee members and elections.

The 2007 scoping process initiated a more modern and efficient method of mailing list management via an integrated project database. Comments received during the scoping period were logged in a master database and associated with the contact information of the party submitting the remark. Individuals submitting comments were automatically added to the project mailing list and will be notified via email or traditional mail as new outreach activities are planned. The database will be used during the DEIS public comment period, as well, to identify issues of concern and refine the public outreach process for the development of the FEIS.

31.4. Environmental Justice Outreach Plan

As described in Chapter 26 – Environmental Justice, one of the guiding Environmental Justice principles followed by the USDOT is to ensure the full and fair participation by all potentially affected communities in the transportation decision-making process. Census block groups with a high percentage of minority or Hispanic persons located within the project corridor area are found in North Bergen, Palisades Park, Leonia, Englewood, and Tenafly. Low income and/or high percentage poverty populations are located within North Bergen, Palisades Park, and Englewood.

As discussed above, public participation during the preparation of the DEIS was solicited for the Scoping Meeting and the Public Hearings, as well as regular Citizens Liaison Committee meetings. Additionally, project information and contact information has been available on the project website, and staff has had many conversations responding to questions and comments from the local community, including the identified target populations.

USDOT also seeks to ensure that communities with “Limited English Proficiency” populations have access to information to the fullest extent feasible and that their participation in providing input into decision-making is encouraged. Spanish and Korean are the dominant non-English languages identified in the study area. As such, advertisements for the Scoping Meeting and the DEIS public hearings have been placed in the Spanish newspapers, *El Especialito* and *El Nuevo*, and the Korean newspapers *Korean Bergen News* and *Segye Times*. In addition, the project website includes a notice of the availability of the DEIS and the public hearings in English, Spanish, and Korean.

31.5. Next Steps

31.5.1. DEIS Hearings

A formal public hearing will be conducted to receive public comment on the findings of the DEIS. These comments will be considered in the preparation of the FEIS.