Integrating Traffic Safety into the Metropolitan- and State-Planning Process

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History: The South Jersey Transportation Planning Organization (SJTPPO) is the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the southern New Jersey region. It covers the Counties of Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem. Under federal law, MPO's carry out transportation planning and decision making for urbanized areas.

Under the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, (ISTEA), MPO's gained an expanded role in transportation planning and capital programming, becoming partners with the state and federal government in deciding how transportation dollars are spent and bringing decisions closer to those served.

In 1998, ISTEA was replaced by the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). TEA-21 reaffirms and retains the structure of the planning process under ISTEA and advances ISTEA’s emphasis on a more balanced transportation system and on the environmental and social consequences of transportation investment.

Both ISTEA and TEA-21 called for a renewed emphasis on safety considerations in the metropolitan planning process, authorizing additional funding for public transit, bicycle and pedestrian accessibility, and air quality initiatives; and addressing health and safety through programs to increase seat belt use, reduce crashes at highway-rail crossings, and fight drunk driving through initiatives for states to adopt tough blood alcohol concentration standards.
Teaming with the New Jersey Division of Highway Traffic Safety, SJTPO spearheaded the creation of the South Jersey Traffic Safety Alliance in 1998. Based on its record of regional cooperation, the SJTPO Policy Board supported forming a similar four-county organization to help SJTPO carry out federally-funded regional planning and project development in the region.

**The Alliance** – The South Jersey Traffic Safety Alliance brings together traffic safety professionals from the fields of law enforcement, community education, fire, rescue, engineering, and planning to develop region-wide traffic safety programs, share successful practices, exchange information, and support capital projects geared toward traffic and pedestrian safety.

Covering the same four counties as the SJTPO, some members of the Alliance are from SJTPO member agencies and help to keep the two organizations working together and informed of each others’ actions.

Heading the Alliance is an Executive Board made up of twelve members, three from each county. The New Jersey Division of Highway Traffic Safety appoints one from each county and each County Representative of the SJTPO Policy Board appoints two. The main purpose of the Executive Board is to make recommendations to the General Membership. These recommendations address legislative issues, committee appointments, safety programs, and training.

Most recently, the Executive Board recommended that there be Associate Executive Board Members to advise the Board. They include a member from NJDHTS, NHTSA, AAA, and SAFE KIDS. In addition, Executive Board Members recommended that the Alliance become official members of the SAFE KIDS Chapters in the region. Both recommendations help promote interagency coordination and cooperation.

**Integrating Traffic Safety Into the Metropolitan Planning Process**

Since its inception in 1998, the South Jersey Traffic Safety Alliance has helped SJTPO select locations for sidewalks; acquire speed trailers; and identify specific problem locations for the Regional Transportation Plan. In a reciprocating relationship, SJTPO has acted on behalf of Alliance members, reaching out to appropriate members of the County Planning Department, County Engineers, and the New Jersey Department of Transportation, to address specific safety concerns identified by Alliance members.
In 1999, SJTPO received a Special Project Award, from the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO), for its work with the SJTSA. The award, one of only two presented nationally, recognized the SJTPO for directly integrating traffic safety into their plans and programs. The annual awards program provides AMPO with illustrations of excellence to use in promoting MPO interests in Washington.

Safety Needs Assessment Survey
One of the first joint SJTPO and SJTSA projects was a survey. Entitled the Safety Needs Assessment Survey, the questionnaire asks for information regarding current traffic safety and educational programs; pedestrian and bicycle safety issues or problems; proposed bike paths or pedestrian facilities or improvements; problems with older and/or younger drivers; problems special to the transportation of the disadvantaged; and records or statistics available. Now conducted every other year, the survey results help the Alliance focus its programs on current traffic safety issues and provides SJTPO with capital programming needs.

Identifying Sidewalk Locations
In the 1998 Safety Needs Assessment Survey, the most frequently mentioned traffic safety concern was lack of sidewalks. It was this identification that prompted SJTPO to use federal funds for a project that will enable sidewalks and other pedestrian safety treatments to be installed in five high pedestrian areas in the region.

The project, known as the Pedestrian Facilities Project Development Project, produced the environmental documents needed to enable federal funds to be used for construction. Alliance members assisted SJTPO in selecting the locations to be studied and reviewed draft plans. To date, four of the five locations have been programmed in the SJTPO Transportation Improvement Plan.
Regional Transportation Plan
In 2000, SJTPO expanded the survey to include the opportunity for Alliance members to identify locations where there was a disproportionate number of crashes and injuries or excessive speeding.

Reviewing the locations submitted, SJTPO included a substantial number (36) in the SJTPO 2025 Regional Transportation Plan as potential candidates for more technical studies from a safety perspective. These locations were able to be included because they are based on the experience and observations of traffic safety professionals.

Originally intended to complement New Jersey’s Safety Management System (SMS) data, SJTSA locations comprise eighty four percent (84%) of the total number of locations (that may require further investigation from a safety perspective) outlined in the Plan. The NJ SMS database covered only accident data to 1995 and the top 100 accident locations throughout New Jersey, therefore, SJTPO could only include the seven (7) locations, in the top 100, that were in the SJTPO region.
Another item identified in the 1998 Safety Needs Assessment Survey was excessive speeding. Seeking to address this problem, SJTPO worked out an innovative agreement, with the Federal Highway Administration, to use federal planning funds to purchase eight radar speed monitor trailers. These speed trailers can be outfitted with Automatic Traffic Recorders, to count and classify vehicles. This feature allows SJTPO member agencies to produce traffic counts to support SJTPO’s regional planning program.

Four units were purchased in 1999 and another four in 2000. The four county planning departments each signed agreements with SJTPO to house and maintain two units. When not in use by the county, local police departments may borrow the units to combat speeding.

SJTP Intercedes
Because SJTPO works so closely with the NJ Department of Transportation (NJDOT) and NJ Transit, SJTPO is in a position to act as an intermediary on behalf of the Alliance. Reviewing a specific request, SJTPO can identify the appropriate party to be contacted within the county or state agency. Forwarding requests for review from SJTPO has seemed to hold more clout and facilitate action from these other agencies.

- Intersection of NJ Route 140, CR 551, Interstate 295 and the New Jersey Turnpike exit ramps

Expressing concern over a major intersection where two county routes, Interstate 295 and exit ramps from the NJ Turnpike all merge, Alliance members Sgt Don Chafin and Lt Arnold DiTeodoro requested assistance from the SJTPO.

Identifying the appropriate individual as the Manager of the Bureau of Traffic Engineering, NJDOT, SJTPO forwarded a letter and pictures submitted by the Alliance members. Six weeks later NJDOT responded with a letter noting missing signs and identifying additional signs to be erected and two months later work was completed.
Flashing Yellow Lights on County Road #625

Identifying the need for flashing yellow lights at certain school zones in his rural municipality, Alliance Member Officer Michael Bernard sought SJTPO’s assistance in determining feasibility in contacting the appropriate individual at the State DOT.

Coincidentally, SJTPO’s Manager of Regional Planning is the former Planning Director for that County and was aware that the County Engineer had experience in this matter.

Working together, the Alliance, Officer Bernard, and the County Engineer plan to have the lights in place for the start of the 2002/2003 school year.

Conclusion: Continuing to put safety first, SJTPO and SJTSA will focus on gathering and analyzing data related to traffic crashes. Crash data by County, through the Year 2000, is now available on-line from the NJDOT Bureau of Accident Records. This information, along with the information gathered from the Year 2002 Safety Needs Assessment Survey, will be used to identify major problem locations in the region.

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