

THE TENNESSEE PLANNING LETTER



Tennessee Chapter of the American Planning Association

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WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING?

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MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

The 2008 TAPA Annual Conference will be held September 24-26, 2008 at the Millennium Centre in Johnson City. Keep your eyes glued to the TAPA website (www.tnapa.org) for more information.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE 2007 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The 2007 TAPA Annual Conference was held September 5 - 7 at the Hilton Hotel in Memphis. This year's conference was held jointly with the Tennessee Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Tennessee Urban Forestry Council, the Urban Land Institute-Memphis, and the U.S. Green Building Council, Memphis Region. The theme was "Building Great Communities." Over 250 people attended the conference.

Mobile workshops included tours of East Memphis, Germantown and Collierville; uptown Memphis; a walking tour of Harbortown; and a tour highlighting pre-war planning in Memphis. All tours ended at the River Terrace Yacht Club, where the conference reception was held.

The annual TAPA awards ceremony was held Thursday evening. Awards were presented in seven different categories:

- Outstanding Planning Award for a Plan
- Outstanding Planning Award for a Project/Program/Tool
- Outstanding Planning Award for Implementation
- President's Award
- Planner of the Year
- Lifetime Achievement

And the Winners Are...

TAPA 2007 Award Winners Pictured Left to Right: Melissa Taylor, Planner of the Year; Mark Donaldson, Knoxville-Knox County MPC, Outstanding Planning Award for a Plan; Gene Pearson, Lifetime Achievement; Brenda Bernards, Metropolitan Nashville Planning Department, Outstanding Planning Award for a Project/Program/Tool; Valerie Birch, Honorable Mention, Planner of the Year; Jeanne Stevens and Del Truitt, Tennessee Department of Transportation, Honorable Mention, Outstanding Planning Award for Implementation. Not pictured: Sarah Powell, President's Award.



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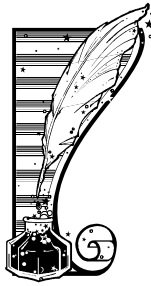
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FROM THE PRESIDENT...

Over the past several months I have heard from several of you who have expressed concern over the implementation of the AICP Commission's new Certification Maintenance program. Some have expressed anger over the program's creation and some have expressed concern over delays in the release of specific program requirements. I share your frustration over the slow, almost agonizing pace the Commission is releasing the details on its implementation. However, I do believe that Certification Maintenance is a good thing. The value of AICP membership is not in the newsletters or case studies that we receive. It is in the recognition that, when you see those letters after a person's name, they are a competent and professional planner with a certain education level and skill set. Our communities are constantly changing and so, too, is the planning profession. I believe it is critical to stay abreast of the latest theories, laws, planning tools and techniques in order to remain current and to be an effective planner.

Another initiative the AICP is undertaking is the creation of the Advanced Specialty Certification. Over the next three to four years, AICP will be introducing an advanced specialized certification program. ***This program is completely voluntary!*** This certification would be above and beyond AICP certification and will have special eligibility requirements for taking the exam. Seven advanced specialized certifications have been identified: Transportation Planning; Urban Design; Environmental Planning; Economic Development; Preservation Planning; Land Use Planning; and Planning Management.

As you may have noticed, the Chapter's letterhead and newsletter has a new look. APA has initiated a branding strategy in an attempt to increase consistency between the APA, its chapters, AICP and APA Divisions. Upcoming changes will include modifications to logos, letterhead, newsletters, and other publications. This will help to increase the visibility of the APA and project a clear and consistent message to the public, the media, and the membership.

Steve Neilson, AICP
Tennessee Chapter President
American Planning Association



MAKING IT EASIER TO READ: THE MOVE TO IMPROVE NEPA DOCUMENTS

*Nancy Skinner, AICP
Senior Planning Manager
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It's been nearly four decades since President Nixon signed into law the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). With the stroke of a pen, federal agencies were required for the first time to integrate environmental values into their decision making processes by considering the environmental impacts of their proposed actions and considering reasonable alternatives to those actions. Since then, thousands of Environmental Assessments (EAs) and Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) have been written to justify a wide assortment of federally funded projects, from new roads and bridges to power plants.

I am guessing that the US Department of Transportation supports among the largest number of environmental review documents of any federal agency (let me know if you have data to support or disprove my statement). As a NEPA documentation specialist myself, I'm sure I have personally contributed to the destruction of several acres of trees while contributing to or preparing several dozen environmental studies for highway and transit projects throughout the Southeastern US over the past 17 years. I would like to think that the documents I have contributed are of high quality and easy to read and understand, but I can honestly say that with age and experience, comes the realization that earlier efforts may not have been as good as I thought then.

Why the Focus on Quality EIS Documents?

In the last five years, the issue of the quality of environmental documents (in particular EISs, which address high profile and often controversial projects) has received considerable attention from the US Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) as well as several transportation industry associations. Beginning in 2003, FHWA joined forces with the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC) in an initiative to improve the readability and functionality of NEPA documents that were being prepared for transportation projects. In 2003 and 2004, a series of surveys, workshops and discussions were held to address, among other things, the quality and clarity of NEPA documents. In May 2006, the joint committee issues a report, "Improving the Quality of Environmental Documents."

According to the 2006 report, FHWA and others felt that many EIS and EA documents:

- Were too large, wordy, repetitious, complex and cumbersome;
- Were often too encyclopedic, and fell short on meaningful analysis;
- Lacked consistency in format and approach;
- Failed to present a coherent story with a logical progression;
- Placed too much focus on being a legal "air-tight" document rather than writing for the public; and
- Focused too much on the "look" versus usability for decisions.

The purpose of conducting and documenting the environmental analysis is to ensure that decision-makers have the best available and most accurate information upon which to make a final decision on the project. These documents must also meet the needs of regulatory agencies, which will use the document as the basis for granting permits and permissions. But these documents must also provide the public with an understandable discussion of what the project is, why it is needed, what the impacts

STaR ANNOUNCES AICP CERTIFICATION MAINTENANCE SUBSIDY PROGRAM

Since the onset of the discussion that has led to the establishment of a continuing education requirement to maintain the AICP designation, the Small Town and Rural (STaR) Planning Division has expressed a concern about the equity of this requirement as it pertains to many of our Division's members. Unlike their metropolitan "cousins", small town and rural planners frequently earn less salary, do without training budgets, and quite often are solo practitioners that can not leave their place of employment during the work day.

To address these equity concerns, STaR is happy to announce the establishment of a subsidy program designed to help defray the expenses involved in maintenance of the AICP certification. To be eligible for the subsidy, you must be a member in good standing of AICP and STaR, and earn less than \$50,000 a year from planning.

Here is how the program works:

- a. Only APA-approved Certification Maintenance coursework and/or study materials are eligible for the subsidy. The applicant must submit the course to STaR before registration. This allows STaR to analyze the content of the course, its eligibility with APA requirements, and also to advertise the course to other members.
- b. Proof of attendance at a seminar is required. As for self-paced materials, STaR reserves the right to ascertain whether the materials were, in fact, studied. Subsidy payments are contingent on submission of an article of no less than 300 words for publication in the STaR newsletter. The article should explain what was learned as a result of the certification maintenance work, as well as its application to small town and

Outstanding Planning Award for a Plan

The City of Knoxville, Department of South Waterfront Development was awarded the Outstanding Planning Award for a Plan for the City of Knoxville Vision Plan and Form-Based Development Code.



Mark Donaldson, Knoxville-Knox County MPC Executive Director, accepting the TAPA 2007 Outstanding Planning Award for a Plan from chapter president, Steve Neilson.

Outstanding Planning Award for Implementation-Honorable Mention

The Tennessee Department of Transportation was awarded Honorable Mention for the Outstanding Planning Award for Implementation for the implementation of 12 Rural Planning Organizations in the State of Tennessee.



Jeanne Stevens, AICP, Director of Long-Range Planning, TDOT and Del Truitt, Coordinator of Local Government and MPO Relations, TDOT, accepting the TAPA 2007 Honorable Mention for Outstanding Planning for Implementation from chapter president, Steve Neilson.

Outstanding Planning Award for a Project/Program/Tool

The Metropolitan Nashville Planning Department was awarded the Outstanding Planning Award for a Project/Program/Tool for the Bedford Avenue Urban Design Overlay.



Brenda Bernards, AICP, Senior Planner, Metropolitan Nashville Planning Department, accepting the TAPA 2007 Outstanding Planning Award for a Project/Program/Tool for the Metropolitan Nashville Planning Department from chapter president, Steve Neilson.

Lifetime Achievement Award

Gene Pearson, FAICP, was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award. Gene, through his tenure at University of Memphis, has been instrumental in the education of countless planners across the state and throughout the country.



Gene Pearson, FAICP, accepting the TAPA 2007 Lifetime Achievement Award from chapter president, Steve Neilson.

Planner of the Year

Melissa Taylor, Director of Transportation Planning /MPO Coordinator at the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Regional Planning Agency, was named the 2007 TAPA Planner of the Year. Melissa was responsible for re-energizing Chattanooga's bicycle planning initiative in the late 1990s. The initiative won the 2007 APA National Planning Excellence Award for Implementation. She is active in the TAPA Chattanooga Section and is currently a participant in Leadership Chattanooga, a 10-month leadership development program sponsored by the Chattanooga Chamber Foundation..



Melissa Taylor accepting the TAPA 2007 Planner of the Year Award from chapter president, Steve Neilson.

Planner of the Year-Honorable Mention

Valerie Birch, AICP, was awarded Honorable Mention for Planner of the Year. Valerie is a Senior Project Manager and Supervising Planner with PB Americas, Inc. and is the Middle Tennessee Section Director and the TAPA newsletter editor.



Valerie Birch, AICP, accepting the TAPA 2007 Planner of the Year Honorable Mention Award from chapter president, Steve Neilson.

President's Award

The President's Award is given for outstanding contributions to the TAPA Chapter. This year's President's Award was presented to Sarah Powell, with the Knoxville-Knox County Metropolitan Planning Commission, in appreciation for her outstanding contribution as the Chapter's webmaster. This award recognizes her incredible responsiveness to Chapter needs and her hours of dedication.



OVERMOUNTAIN VICTORY NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL

September 24, 2007 marked the 227th anniversary of the Overmountain Men's campaign in the fight against the British army and supporters during the Revolutionary War. On the 24th, Sullivan County and Bluff City accepted a plaque certifying the first walkable portion of the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, called the Choate's Ford Walking Trail, in downtown Bluff City. Choate's Ford was the first name of the settlement now known as Bluff City. Local volunteers from this region joined other mountain men stretching from Abingdon, Virginia down to the Kings Mountain of South Carolina where they changed our history forever. During the war in 1780, these men gave up everything and marched across the mountain and defeated British Colonel Fergusson in a battle that lasted just over an hour. This was the turning point in the Revolutionary War (Charleston had already surrendered to the British).

The certification ceremony was held at the Bluff City Middle School, which was appropriate as the historic route passes through the school's football field. The children, teachers, city reps, county representatives, general public, Lieutenant Governor Ron Ramsey, citizens and the press enjoyed the remarks from the National Park Service Superintendent, Paul Carson, and the storytelling led by the Overmountain Victory Trail Association reenactment volunteers.

This trail marks the first phase of the Sullivan County's portion of the 330 miles of the historical trail. Over the next year, the Planning Department, with assistance from local volunteers and history buffs, will pull together a comprehensive trail plan detailing the next 21 miles within Sullivan County.

*Submitted by Ambre Torbett, AICP
Director of Planning and Zoning
Sullivan County, Tennessee*



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of the project will be on the community surrounding it, and what will the agency do to avoid, minimize, or mitigate those impacts.

What Is FHWA Suggesting?

The 2006 AASHTO/ACEC/FHWA report offers three core principals that are essential to improving the quality of the NEPA documents:

1. Tell the story of the project so that the reader can easily understand what the purpose and need of the project is and describe the strengths and weaknesses of alternatives;
2. Keep the document as brief as possible by using clear, concise writing, an easy-to-use format, effective graphics and visual elements, and discussion of issues and impacts in proportion to their relative importance; and
3. Ensure that the document meets all legal requirements in a way that is easy to follow for regulators and technical reviewers."

Recently, there have been several experiments with more readable document formats that have captured the attention of transportation professionals and generated considerable discussion, both positive and negative. The Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall Replacement Project (prepared by Washington State DOT) took a fairly radical direction in presenting information: The EIS was prepared in an 11 by 17 inch, landscape format, making extensive use of a question and answer format and using color graphics and photography to illustrate concepts and impacts.

The Alaskan Way Viaduct EIS was also unusual in its methods of presenting the technical material; it used a non-traditional chapter organization that structured the discussion around major anticipated questions. Instead of having traditional headings like "Purpose and Need," "Alternatives Considered," and "Environmental Impacts," this EIS asked

questions for headings, such as "Why do we need this project?," "Where is the project located?," and "How will this project change the character and land use in the project area?." The document

What Can You Do to Make a Document More Readable?

The 2006 FHWA report offers a number of tips and guidelines for making

What would YOU rather read?

Traditional Writing

"Intersections that are projected to operate with especially long delays or overcapacity during the PM peak hour are identified as "congested intersections." These intersections are those that operate under LOS F conditions (average vehicle delay of greater than 80 seconds) or ICU greater than 100 percent. Congested intersections are further identified as "highly congested" if the exceed 110 seconds of average vehicle delay and have an ICU of greater than 110 percent."

Notice how this paragraph talks about LOS, PM Peak, and ICU--meaningless to most readers.

Reader-Friendly Writing

"What are congested and highly congested intersections?"

Congested intersections are intersections that cause drivers considerable delay. A driver might wait between one and two minutes to get through a traffic signal at a congested intersection. At a highly congested intersection, a driver might wait two minutes or more to get through the traffic signal."

This paragraph explains the same information as the traditional EIS paragraph only the reader can clearly understand the language and how they will be affected by the issue

tries to anticipate what questions that various audiences are likely to ask.

Below is an example of the format from Washington State DOT's report, *Reader-Friendly Documents, a new direction for communicating complex environmental issues*, June 2006.

Washington State DOT has used the "reader friendly" approach on several projects, and has reported positive results. The Washington State DOT environmental services policy manager stated in 2005 that the public comments received on such documents have been "more sophisticated and specific to the project. Comments were substantive rather than broad brush, and citizens seem to comprehend the elements of the proposed action far better than in the past." Other states such as Pennsylvania, Utah, Montana, Indiana, and North Carolina have used the reader friendly approach on high profile projects, and Tennessee's first reader-friendly EIS, US 127 in Cumberland and Fentress counties, was approved by FHWA in September 2007.

documents more readable. Many of these are listed below, along with others that I have found helpful over the years. I don't take credit for these; I have been quite fortunate to have great mentors and colleagues who have gladly shared their tips with me.

- ◆ Don't just summarize and recite data; you have to connect the dots – analyze and explain what the data means. Don't rely on the data speaking for itself.
- ◆ Avoid excessive acronyms and minimize abbreviations. It can be very confusing and frustrating to your readers. After all, APA isn't just the American Planning Association; it is also the American Psychiatric Association. I include a list of acronyms at the front of the document (or in Appendix A), and give the full name and the acronym in parenthesis at the first instance.

CM Subsidy continued from page 3

rural planning. The article need not directly mention that the member received a STaR subsidy.

- c. Reimbursement checks would be sent to qualifying members as received by the Secretary-Treasurer after receipt by the Newsletter Editor of the required newsletter article. A maximum subsidy of \$500 per two-year maintenance period is allowed. The maximum subsidy per course is \$100.

If this is a program that interests you, feel free to contact STaR Chair Dale Powers at drpowers@co.pine.mn.us or call Dale at 1-800-450-7463 x 6707.

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Such as Tennessee Chapter of the American Planning Associations (TAPA).

- ◆ Avoid the use of technical jargon and define or explain complex or arcane concepts. Text boxes can be used to explain a term that is important to the discussion but might not be familiar to all readers. A glossary may also be included.
- ◆ Consider using an editor in chief to ensure that the document reads as if a single person wrote it.
- ◆ Consider using a standardize format or template – to make it easier for readers to follow.
- ◆ Include a detailed table of contents, so that a reader can quickly find the issues he or she may be most interested in. Don't make them read the entire document just to find their interest.
- ◆ Make liberal use of headings, section summaries, tabs or dividers, highlighting, bullets, text boxes, and/or sidebars.

- ◆ Consider compatibility of the document across different media. Some people want a hard copy, while others prefer to read the document electronically. Access to the document on websites helps make it more available.
- ◆ Build in a solid quality assurance and quality control program. Quality should focus on :
 - Editorial quality (checking grammar, spelling, syntax, fact checking, place names, etc);
 - Technical validity;
 - Legal sufficient; and
 - Overall readability.
- ◆ Hold the adjectives. Don't be overly dramatic.

So What is the Benefit?

Reports and NEPA documents prepared with these concepts in mind will not necessarily be shorter or quicker to prepare. But these documents should be clearer, should result in faster reviews, and encourage more substantive and concise comments from readers. A reader-friendly document should help the project proponents demonstrate accountability and build trust with the public and regulatory agencies. It should also help to engage the public, decision makers, and regulatory agencies in meaningful dialogue about the project. Overall a high quality, reader friendly document should help improve decision making and project delivery.

American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, American Council of Engineering Companies, and Federal Highway Administration. Improving the Quality of Environmental Documents, A Report of the Joint AASHTO/ACEC Committee in Cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration, May 2006. http://environment.transportation.org/pdf/IOED-1_for_CEE.pdf.

Washington State Department of Transportation. Reader Friendly Document Tool Kit. June 2005. <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Environment/ReaderFriendly.htm>.



Tennessee Environmental Procedures Manual Available On-Line

Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) Environmental Division has announced the availability of the *Tennessee Environmental Procedures Manual* or TEPM. This manual provides guidance for preparing the environmental analysis and documentation required for transportation projects such as new or widened roadways, bridges, or transit systems. Projects that are funded in whole or in part with federal funds or have major federal actions must follow the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, widely known as NEPA. In addition, state-funded transportation projects that require the acquisition of right-of-way and/or the construction of new roadways and other transportation facilities must now undergo a rigorous environmental review. The environmental review is documented in a Tennessee Environmental Evaluation Report (referred to as a TEER) that will be made available for public review.

The new procedures manual was developed to guide the professional staff in the TDOT Environmental Division and other TDOT Divisions and consultants working on TDOT projects. Other state and local agency staff and consultants who are working on transportation projects may use the TEPM for guidance, either voluntarily or as required under TDOT's Local Government Guidelines for the Management of Federally and State Funded Transportation Projects.

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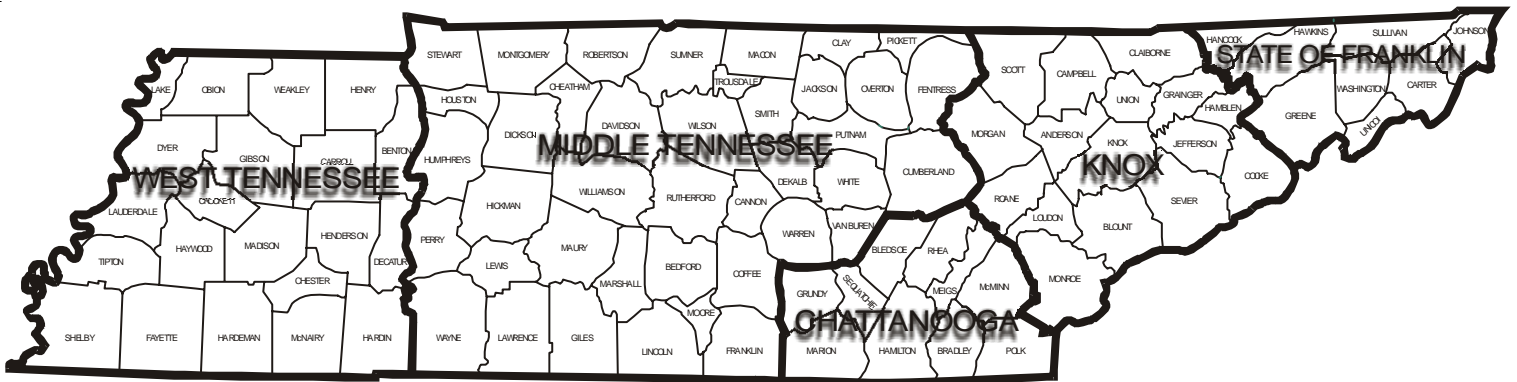
TEPM continued from page 7

This "how-to" manual is intended to guide its users in:

1. Undertaking and successfully completing the NEPA process for federally funded transportation projects or those transportation projects that require a major federal action (such as Section 404 permits);
2. Undertaking environmental evaluations of state-funded transportation projects through the TEER process;
3. Standardizing work efforts and environmental documents;
4. Improving the quality of the documents and the analyses;
5. Facilitating the development and review of documents by TDOT staff and federal and state agencies; and
6. Providing technical guidance on impact assessment.

While this manual is a "how-to guide," it is not intended to be the sole textbook for conducting detailed technical studies. More detailed guidance for performing specific types of studies, such as ecological studies, historic architecture, hazardous materials, air quality, noise and permits, are available from the Environmental Division's Natural Resource Office and Social and Cultural Resources Office and will soon be made available on the Environmental Division's website. The TEPM is available on TDOT's website at <http://www.tdot.state.tn.us/environment/tepm.htm>. The Local Government Guidelines are available on TDOT's website at <http://www.tdot.state.tn.us/local/Documents/LocalAgencyGuidelines.pdf>

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Deadline for Submissions

The next issue of the Tennessee Planning Letter will be emailed in April. The deadline for submission of articles, information and other tidbits is March 15, 2008. For more information, contact Valerie Birch: birchv@pbworld.com or 615-340-9186.