

Environmental Study Process

The proposed I-26 Connector will involve state and federal funds. Any agency that proposes a project involving federal funds must comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Under NEPA, an agency must study the adverse and beneficial environmental impacts of alternatives that meet a project's purpose and need. This planning process is divided into the steps described in detail below.

Project development for the I-26 Connector had proceeded to Step 4 when, at the request of area citizens, additional public involvement was undertaken. This re-visitation of Step 2 resulted in several additional alternatives being suggested for detailed studies. The project is currently in Step 3 and 4.

STEP 1: Initiate project and collect project data

Develop the purpose and need for the project.

The purposes of the I-26 Connector project are to connect I-26 south of Asheville with US 19-23 north of Asheville, relieve traffic congestion on existing I-240 in West Asheville, and enhance regional travel along the I-26 to US 19-23 corridor.

Inventory issues that affect project options

The existing land use along the project corridors was evaluated to determine areas and elements protected by laws and environmental regulations.

STEP 2: Identify alternatives

Develop Land Suitability Mapping

The Land Suitability Map is a map of major features and constraints that can affect the location of a highway project. These features include steep topography, wetlands, floodplains, streams, neighborhoods, industrial sites, hazardous waste sites, historic properties, federal lands, and community facilities such as parks, schools, libraries, fire stations, and hospitals. Sources for this information include the US Geological Survey topographic maps, US Fish and Wildlife Service National Wetland Inventory, and geographic information provided by local governments.

Perform Preliminary Field Studies

These studies included preliminary surveys to field check the data obtained for the land suitability mapping.

Hold a Citizens Informational Workshop

Citizens Informational Workshops are held with the general public to explain the project development process, display land suitability mapping, identify project constraints, and discuss alternatives developed for a project. Numerous public meetings and Citizens Informational Workshops about the I-26 Connector project have been held.

Document Community Concerns

Select Alternatives for Detailed Study

Preliminary alternatives are evaluated to determine their ability to address travel deficiencies, and potential for adverse environmental impacts. The best preliminary alternatives are selected for further evaluation. Four alternatives have been selected as Detailed Study Alternatives for the I-26 Connector.

STEP 3: Conduct detailed studies

Perform Detailed Field Surveys

These surveys include intensive field surveys for protected plant and animal species, wetlands, and streams within the boundaries of the Detailed Study Alternatives. Field studies for noise and relocation impacts also are conducted.

Perform engineering studies

Each alternative is evaluated for adequacy, safety and the ability to be constructed. Preliminary engineering designs are developed for each of the Detailed Study Alternatives.

Environmental Analyses

Issues that are evaluated include traffic, land use, farmland, socioeconomic factors, residential/business relocations, environmental justice, air quality, noise, natural resources (wetlands, streams, endangered species), hydraulics, floodplains, archaeological and historic resources, hazardous substances/underground storage tanks, visual impacts, and construction impacts.

STEP 4: Prepare a Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Publish a Draft Environmental Impact Statement

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will include the purpose and need for the project and summaries of the alternatives analysis, detailed field surveys, preliminary engineering, and environmental analyses. A newsletter is issued announcing the availability of the Draft EIS for public review.

STEP 5: Hold a Public Hearing

The hearing provides a formal opportunity for public comment and input regarding the project designs and Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

STEP 6: Identify the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative

The North Carolina Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration identify the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative (LEDPA) based on the results described in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement

and input received from citizens and governmental agencies (i.e. local government officials and federal and state environmental regulatory and resource agencies).

STEP 7: Prepare a Final Environmental Impact Statement

Revise the Preliminary Engineering Design Plans for the LEDPA as necessary to minimize impacts to the human and natural environments.

Publish the Final Environmental Impact Statement

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will include the purpose and need for the project, environmental analyses of the detailed study alternatives and summaries of the alternative analyses.

STEP 8: Prepare a Record of Decision

A Record of Decision (ROD) will explain the reasons for the project decisions, summarize any mitigation measures that will be incorporated in the project, and document alternative selection.

Steps Beyond: Beyond the Environmental Process

Following publication of the ROD, final engineering design plans are prepared for the selected alternative, after which right-of-way acquisition (buying of property needed to construct the road) and construction of the roadway can proceed.