

**New Visions 2030**

**Meeting Environmental Mitigation & Consultation Requirements of SAFETEA-LU:  
An Opportunity to Continue Toward a Sustainable Regional Transportation System**

**Background**

*SAFETEA-LU places several new requirements on both the content and process of developing long-range regional transportation plans.*

*A **discussion** of the types of potential environmental mitigation activities, and potential areas in which to carry out these activities, that may have the greatest potential to restore and maintain the environmental functions affected by the long-range regional transportation plan must occur. **This discussion may focus on the plan's policies, programs, or strategies, rather than at a project-specific level.***

*This discussion must be done in **consultation** with federal, state and local agencies responsible for land use management, natural resources, environmental protection, conservation and historic preservation. Finally, a **comparison** must be made between the long-range regional transportation plan and state conservation plans or maps, and inventories and maps of natural or historic resources if available.*

**Approach**

**For discussion of potential mitigation activities**, CDTC has taken a two pronged approach to meet these requirements focusing on:

- **A scan of New Visions principles, strategies, actions and resulting programs** CDTC has carried out over the past decade and plans to initiate in the future to help identify potential gaps.
- **A game plan to undertake a comparative analysis** of natural and cultural resource mapping relative to the mapped locations of projects along with draft discussion of various best practices or guidelines that should be applied to projects related to the long range transportation plan. CDTC obtained mapping and geographic information systems (GIS) files, courtesy of the Open Space Institute, which identify heritage areas; historic places, trails & byways; woodlands; natural habitats; agricultural areas; existing farms; water areas; constrained lands; and protected open space areas within the region. Areas of overlap between mapped resources and project locations will be highlighted allowing identification of potential environmental impacts and potential types of mitigation activities.

**To address the consultation requirements** CDTC created a mailing list including contacts for federal, state, and local land use management, natural resource, environmental protection, conservation and historic preservation agencies and groups to be used to solicit input on the potential environmental mitigation activities discussion and on the draft New Visions 2030 plan. This list will be continually refined as appropriate.

## **Findings**

**New Visions system goals, principles, strategies and actions provide a framework for improving regional environmental quality.** With its strong emphasis on fostering a safe, multi-modal and well managed system that works well for all users, the New Visions 2030 plan contributes to urban revitalization and attractive suburban and rural centers, and works to minimize capacity expansion for single occupant vehicles. Related beneficial environmental impacts include a reduction in energy consumption, avoidance of disruption of natural and cultural resources and reduction in air pollution, and protection of environmental justice populations.

**From the scan of the New Visions 2030 plan, there is clear commitment to environmental protection. The plan focuses on:**

- maintenance, repair & renewal of the existing transportation system
- system management in preference to expansion
- alternative modes of travel
- transportation investments that work toward sustaining a quality region
- dampening single-occupant vehicle demand growth
- integrated land use/transportation planning and design

**CDTC is rare among MPOs in the nation in its insistence on community-oriented, environmentally-sensitive planning prior to consideration of any significant project.** Consistency with local planning is a rigid screening criterion. Further, CDTC's commitment to habitat preservation (as demonstrated with the New Karner Rd. plans) has been cited as a national model by the USGAO. This approach, coupled with CDTC's conservative budget for system expansion, limits the basic need for environmental mitigation in the New Visions plan.

**Numerous sustainable and innovative practices used at CDTC are consistent with, and help to further, environmental stewardship goals laid out in New Visions;** over twenty five (25) were identified and briefly described in the full draft report.

**Regarding the game plan for comparative analysis, projects to be overlain on natural and cultural resource mapping** include those currently on the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) that are of a type that have a significant potential for environmental impacts, including:

- Highways/Roadways: new construction, reconstruction or other related projects that add physical capacity to a highway or roadway.
- Bridges: new construction, or reconstruction or other related projects that add physical capacity to a highway or roadway

- Transit: fixed guideways, new bus lanes that add physical capacity to a roadway, new or expanded maintenance facilities, new or expanded park and ride lots.
- Bicycle and/or Pedestrian facilities: new construction of off-road facilities, addition of on-road bicycle lanes or sidewalks

The intent of this process is to identify possible impacts from planned projects on environmentally sensitive resources on a regional level to add value to the deliberative transportation planning and programming decision-making processes at the CDTC table. The results of this analysis could also identify opportunities for larger-than-project-specific mitigation activities (such as mitigation banking and/or joint mitigation activities including wetland banking, in-lieu fee arrangements and conservation banking), potentially yielding more regionally significant environmental benefits. This approach is consistent with and should be coordinated with recommendations of New York State's Transportation Master Plan for 2030 which includes environmental sustainability as a priority results area.

This broad-level analysis is not designed to explore detailed design alternatives or impacts at the project level; detailed environmental analysis takes place during project development by the implementing agency.

In terms of project development, both state and locally sponsored and implemented projects are required to follow the **New York State Department of Transportation's (NYSDOT) Environmental Policy which recognizes the obligation to preserve, protect and enhance the environment in carrying out transportation projects** and that strict regulatory compliance is only a part of the environmental stewardship responsibility. The policy establishes that transportation needs can be met while proactively protecting, conserving, restoring and enhancing important natural and man-made resources; that opportunities should be sought to cooperatively advance Federal, State and local environmental policies, programs and objectives; and that appropriate Context Sensitive Design measures will be employed to ensure that project designs reflect community values.

### **Next Steps**

This comparative analysis effort is a work in progress. Subsequent to this consultation effort, mapping and related analysis may be modified or expanded; it will be refined based on lessons learned and input from consulting agencies.

## Policy Recommendations

### *Proposed Environmental Principle*

An additional planning and investment principle is proposed for inclusion in the New Visions 2030 plan:

**Environmental stewardship is one of CDTC's emerging roles and is crucial to the success of and quality of life in this region. Transportation investments must improve or preserve the region's cultural and natural environment.** Wise use of land can assist in maintaining an ecological balance between human activities and the natural environment. Such ecological balance and natural beauty are important determinants of the region's ability to provide a pleasant and habitable environment for all forms of life. Preservation of the environmentally significant features of the natural resource base further contributes to the maintenance of the ecological balance, natural beauty, and the economic well-being of the region.

### Recommended Strategies and Actions

- Explore expanding CDTC's membership to restore the Department of Environmental Conservation as a member to enhance communication and information sharing regarding the region's critical environmental issues, environmental resources, and to ensure broader coordination of land use/transportation planning efforts. (DEC withdrew from active participation years ago.)
- Use geographic information systems information (GIS) to overlay limits of candidate TIP projects, of project types that have a significant potential for environmental impacts, against natural and cultural resources mapping as part of the evaluation process for candidate projects during the next and subsequent TIP updates.
- Coordinate with DOT and DEC and others on updating this mapping and corresponding GIS databases.
- Explore a Green Corridors approach modeled after Saratoga Green Infrastructure Plan. Green corridors can help protect existing riparian buffers and woodlands, improve water and air quality, and lower storm water management costs.
- Explore recommendations from the Open Space Institute's report and from NYSDEC's Open Space Plan, and other resources (county farmland protection plans) to see where CDTC can reinforce those efforts as appropriate.
- Promote well-designed transportation and land development projects through an integrated planning and design approach. Explore creation of an Integrated Community and Transportation Design toolkit to ensure pursuit of enhanced

environmental quality for projects emerging from the plan. This toolkit could be applicable to other issue areas as well such as Safety and could organize best practices at the regional, community, and site levels. Areas of research in developing this toolkit could include benefits of low impact development, benefits of increasing tree coverage, “green” parking lot design, etc.

- Revise the TIP candidate project justification package, including the section in which preliminary identification of potential environmental issues is made. This revision will be done consistent with Appendix A to Part 450 of SAFETEA-LU regarding linking the transportation planning and NEPA process/project development, to ensure candidate project scopes as provided in project justification packages are descriptive enough to reflect project purpose and need consistent with New Visions principles and environmental quality goals.
- Expand project descriptions in the TIP or create a companion document to the TIP that contains sufficient information to convey the scope and expectations for the project, including confirmation of consistency with New Visions principles. Broad access to such information will help keep the chain of project intent and details (“scope”) alive as projects move through the project development process. Consistent with how TIP project scope changes are currently handled, if a project sponsor desires to change the project scope or deviate from explicit expectations, such change must be approved by the Planning Committee.