

During the course of the public debate regarding High Speed Rail (HSR) in the Springfield area, the Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) process has been mentioned frequently as a means for addressing the various issues being discussed by governmental leaders and the public. The Springfield-Sangamon County Regional Planning Commission (SSCRPC) thought that it might be useful to provide a brief synopsis of what CSS is and how it is to be approached based on the guidelines and fundamental principles laid out by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)<sup>1</sup> and the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT)<sup>2</sup>.

### **Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) Defined**

As the term implies, CSS is an approach that considers the total context within which a transportation improvement project will exist. The Federal Highway Administration defines CSS<sup>3</sup> as: a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach that involves all stakeholders in the development transportation facilities so that they fit within their physical settings and preserve the scenic, aesthetic, historic and environmental resources of the area, while maintaining safety and mobility. CSS principles include the employment of early, continuous and meaningful involvement of the public and all stakeholders throughout the project development process.

The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) defines CSS as “an approach that uses many tools with one goal in mind: plan and design transportation projects that ‘fit’ into their surroundings – what is known as ‘context’.”<sup>4</sup> According to IDOT, CSS is an approach that incorporates the need to:

- Strike a balance between cost, safety, mobility, community needs, and the environment.
- Involves stakeholders in the decision-making process early and continuously, throughout the development of the project.
- Address all appropriate modes of transportation in the plan and design of the project, including motor vehicle, mass transit, pedestrians and bicyclists.
- Use all appropriate disciplines to help plan for and design the project.
- Apply the flexibility inherent in the design standards to fit the project into its surroundings.
- Incorporate aesthetics as part of basic “good design”.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.dot.state.il.us/>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/context/what.cfm>.

<sup>4</sup> IDOT (not dated). Context Sensitive Solutions: Detailed Guidelines for Practice, p. 2. Springfield, IL: IDOT.

## The Federal Perspective

The use of CSS is addressed in Federal and State law as well as policy. For example, SAFETEA-LU, the Federal transportation act [US Code Section 109(c) (2) of title 23], includes consideration of identified documents and materials that define the core principles of CSS by eight "characteristics of the process that yield excellence" and seven "qualities that characterize excellence in transportation design".

The eight characteristics of the process that yield excellence<sup>5</sup> are:

- The project satisfies the purpose and needs as agreed to by a full range of stakeholders. This agreement is forged in the earliest phase of the project and amended as warranted as the project develops.
- The project is a safe facility for both the user and the community.
- The project is in harmony with the community, and it preserves environmental, scenic, aesthetic, historic, and natural resource values of the area; i.e., exhibits context sensitive design.
- The project exceeds the expectations of both designers and stakeholders and achieves a level of excellence in people's minds.
- The project involves efficient and effective use of the resources (time, budget, community) of all involved parties.
- The project is designed and built with minimal disruption to the community.
- The project is seen as having added lasting value to the community.

The seven qualities that characterize excellence in transportation design<sup>6</sup> are:

- Communication with all stakeholders is open, honest, early, and continuous.
- A multidisciplinary team is established early, with disciplines based on the needs of the specific project, and with the inclusion of the public.
- A full range of stakeholders is involved with transportation officials in the scoping phase. The purposes of the project are clearly defined, and consensus on the scope is forged before proceeding.
- The highway development process is tailored to meet the circumstances. This process should examine multiple alternatives that will result in a consensus of approach methods.
- A commitment to the process from top agency officials and local leaders is secured.
- The public involvement process, which includes informal meetings, is tailored to the project.
- The landscape, the community, and valued resources are understood before engineering design is started.
- A full range of tools for communication about project alternatives is used (e.g., visualization).

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/>.

<sup>6</sup> See Ibid.

## The State Perspective

In addition to the Federal perspective, and as mentioned previously, the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) adheres to a similar definition with slight variations. IDOT<sup>7</sup> sees CSS as an interdisciplinary approach that seeks effective, multimodal transportation solutions by working with stakeholders to develop, build and maintain cost-effective transportation facilities which fit into and reflect the project's surroundings – its “context.” Through early, frequent, and meaningful communication with stakeholders, and a flexible and creative approach to design, the resulting projects should improve safety and mobility for the traveling public, while seeking to preserve and enhance the scenic, economic, historic, and natural qualities of the settings through which they pass.

Based on this definition, IDOT has stated<sup>8</sup> that CSS seeks to ensure that stakeholders' views are carefully considered in the decision-making process. The information gained from partnering with stakeholders is then used by the transportation agency to develop an informed solution to the transportation issue and to plan and design transportation projects that “fit” into their surroundings.

It is important to note that the CSS process is reflected in State law as well as Federal. Illinois Public Act 93-0545<sup>9</sup> amended the Illinois Highway Code to include “context sensitivity” as a part of that code. This act states that it is the intent of the Illinois General Assembly to ensure that IDOT projects exist in harmony with their surroundings and add value to communities, as well as adequately meet the State's transportation needs.

Under the act, IDOT is to embrace principles of context sensitive design and context sensitive solutions in its policies and procedures for the planning, design, construction, and operation of its projects for new construction or the major expansion of existing transportation facilities.

This state law also calls for early and ongoing collaboration with affected citizens, elected officials, interest groups, and other stakeholders to ensure that the values and needs of affected communities are identified and carefully considered in the development of transportation projects. The intent is to promote and explore innovative solutions, commensurate with the scope of each project, that effectively balance safety, mobility, community, and environmental objectives in a manner that enhances the relationship of the transportation facility with its setting.

## Relationship to NEPA

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) [42 USC 4321 et seq.] requires that transportation agencies “examine and avoid potential impacts to the social and natural environment” when considering transportation projects.<sup>10</sup> According to IDOT, the CSS

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.dot.il.gov/css/basics.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See 605 ILCS 5/4-219.

<sup>10</sup> IDOT (not dated). Context Sensitive Solutions: Detailed Guidelines for Practice, p. 16. Springfield, IL: IDOT.

process is not meant to replace NEPA but work with it, with an “eye towards making sure that the outcomes of stakeholder involvement can be used in a NEPA review”.<sup>11</sup> In this way the CSS can be fitted into the NEPA process rather than become a separate process.

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The Springfield-Sangamon County Regional Planning Commission (SCRPC) serves as the joint planning body for Sangamon County and the City of Springfield, as well as the Metropolitan Planning Organization for transportation planning in the region.

The Commission has 17 members including representatives from the Sangamon County Board, Springfield City Council, special units of government, and six appointed citizens from the city and county. The Executive Director is appointed by the Executive Board of the Commission.

The Commission works with other public and semi-public agencies throughout the area to promote orderly growth and redevelopment, and assists other Sangamon County communities with their planning needs. Through its professional staff, the SSCRPC provides overall planning services related to land use, housing, recreation, transportation, economics, environment, and special projects. It also houses the Sangamon County Department of Zoning and Building Safety which oversees zoning, building permits and code, and liquor licensing for the County.

The Commission prepares area-wide planning documents and assists the County, cities, and villages, as well as special districts, with planning activities. The staff reviews all proposed subdivisions and makes recommendations on all Springfield and Sangamon County zoning and variance requests. The agency serves as the county's Plat Officer, Floodplain Administrator, Census coordinator, and local A-95 review clearinghouse to process and review all federally funded applications for the county. The agency also maintains existing base maps, census tract maps, township and zoning maps and the road name map for the county.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 18.