

## The Importance of “Purpose and Need” in Environmental Documents

### Introduction

- The purpose and need section is in many ways the most important chapter of an EA/EIS.
  1. It establishes why the agency is proposing to spend large amounts of taxpayers’ money while at the same time causing environmental impacts.
  2. A clear, well-justified purpose and need section explains to the public and decision makers that the expenditure of funds is necessary and worthwhile and that the priority the project is being given relative to other needed highway projects is warranted.
  3. Although environmental impacts are expected to be caused by the project, the purpose and need section should justify why impacts are acceptable based on the project’s importance.
- The project purpose and need drives the process for alternatives consideration, in-depth analysis, and ultimate selection.
  1. CEQ regulations require that the EA/EIS address the “no-action” alternative and “rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives.”
  2. A well justified purpose and need is vital to meeting the requirements of Section 4(f), the E.O. 11990 Wetlands, E.O. 11988 Floodplains, and Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines. Without a well-defined, well-established and well-justified purpose and need, it will be difficult to determine which alternatives are reasonable, prudent and practicable, and it may be impossible to dismiss the no-build alternative.
  3. Definitions.

### Basic Ingredients of Purpose and Need

- The purpose and need should be as comprehensive and specific as possible.
  1. Rather than simply stating that additional capacity is needed between two points, information on the adequacy of current facilities to handle the present and projected traffic, (e.g., what capacity is needed and the level of service for the existing and proposed facilities) should be discussed. Other information on factors such as safety, system linkage, social demands, economic development, and modal interrelationships, etc., that the proposed project will attempt to address, should be described as fully.
  2. This will assist in identifying and refining the alternatives that should be analyzed. Further, it will in a sense “protect” those viable alternatives from sniping by external interests and capricious suggestions to study something else. If the purpose of and need

for the proposed project are rigorously defined, the number of “solutions” which will satisfy the conditions can be more readily identified and be clear to others why they were identified.

- The purpose and need section of the project should evolve as information is developed and more is learned about the project and the study area.
  1. Assume that the only known information with regard to purpose and need is that additional capacity is needed between points x and y. At the outset, it may appear that commuter traffic to a downtown area is the problem and only this traffic needs to be served. A wide range of alternatives may meet this need. As the studies progress, it may be learned that a shopping center, university, major suburban employer, and other traffic generators contribute substantially to the problem and require transportation service. In this case, the need is further refined so that not only commuter trips but also student, shopping, and other trips will be accommodated.
  2. These refinements would clearly reduce and limit the number of alternatives that could satisfy the project’s purpose and need, thereby reducing the number and range of reasonable, prudent and practicable alternatives. If an alternative is suggested that does not serve the university or other traffic generator, and such service is a vital element of the project, the alternative may be eliminated from future study since it does not meet the need for the project.
- FHWA has developed guidance on many of the elements that may assist in explaining a project’s purpose and need (e.g., capacity, safety, system linkage, etc.).
  1. The elements that are relevant should be as fully developed as possible and used to compare the present, future no-build, and future build conditions. Data should be presented on such factors as: vehicle hours of travel, travel speeds, crashes including injuries and fatalities, costs to the travelling public, economic development potential, access to public facilities, etc. It is not sufficient to state that the project is needed to provide increased capacity and improve safety. Supporting data must be provided.

### Consideration of Alternatives

- After the basic purpose and need for the project are established, a number of lines or concepts can be drawn to connect points logical termini.
  1. If the project’s purpose and need are vague as to only say that a transportation improvement between x and y is needed, then reasonable alternatives would cover a wide range and must be evaluated to comply with the CEQ regulations.
  2. As the project’s purpose and need is refined, a number of alternatives will drop out, thereby permitting a more focused analysis of those alternatives which truly address the problem to be solved.

- The type of alternatives to be considered will be wide ranging: from no-build to TSM and TDM to upgrading an existing facility to roadways on new location. Traffic demands, safety concerns, system continuity considerations, etc., all help to define reasonable alternatives.

Transportation System Management – activities that maximize the efficiency of existing system: fringe parking, ridesharing, HOV lanes, and traffic signal timing optimization. Most effective in urban areas.

Travel Demand Management – actions whose purpose is to reduce traffic problems through improved management of vehicle trip demand. Primarily directed at commuter travel, structured to reduce dependence on SOVs, alter the timing of travel, or somehow otherwise maximize the movement of people.

- Beyond the CEQ regulations requirement of evaluating a full and reasonable range of alternatives, there are other more action-limiting requirements for alternatives under Section 4(f), the Executive Orders on Wetlands and Floodplains, and the Section 404(b)(1) guidelines. To address these requirements and conclusively demonstrate that some alternatives are not prudent or practicable, a well justified purpose and need are vital.
- The use of land from a Section 4(f) protected property (significant publicly owned public park, recreation area or wildlife and waterfowl refuge, or significant historic site) may not be approved unless a determination is made that there is no feasible and prudent alternative to such use.
  1. There are numerous factors that could render an alternative “not prudent” because of unique problems, including cost and environmental impacts. If an alternative does not meet the project’s purpose or satisfy the needs then the alternative is not prudent provided the purpose and need section can substantiate those unique problems will be caused by not building the project.
- If a proposed action is to be located in a wetland or it entails a floodplain encroachment with significant impacts, a finding must be made that there is no practicable alternative to the wetland take or floodplain encroachment.

Practicable – Available and capable of being done after taking in to consideration cost, existing technology, and logistics in light of overall project purposes.

1. An alternative that does not meet the need for the project is not practicable. If the project’s purpose and need are **not** adequately addressed, specifically delineated and properly justified, resource agencies, interest groups, the public or others will be able to generate one or possibly several alternatives which avoid or limit the impact and “appear” practicable. Sometimes long, drawn out negotiations or additional analyses are needed to clearly demonstrate that an alternative is not practicable, where a well-described justification of the project’s purpose and need would have clearly established it.

- If an alternative does not satisfy the purpose and need for the project, as a rule, it should not be included in the analysis as an apparent reasonable alternative.

### Using Purpose and Need in Decisionmaking

- The purpose and need define what can be considered reasonable, prudent, and practicable alternatives. The decisionmaking process should first consider those alternatives that meet the purpose and need for the project at an acceptable cost and level of environmental impact relative to the benefits that will be derived from the project.
- At times, it is possible that no alternative meets all aspects of the project's purpose and need. In this case, it must be determined if the alternatives are acceptable and worthwhile pursuing in light of the cost, environmental impact and less than optimal transportation solution.
  1. To properly assess this, it is important to determine the elements of the purpose and need which are critical to the project, as opposed to those that may be desirable or simply support it.
- Other times, the cost or level of environmental impact are **not** acceptable and an alternative that only partially meets the purpose and need or the no-build alternative must be considered. If the costs are justified in relation to the transportation benefits, then a less than full-build alternative may be acceptable.
- In the vast majority of cases, at least one alternative will fully meet the purpose and need at an acceptable cost and level of impact. In cases where more than one alternative fully meets the purpose and need, a number of factors including cost, traffic service, safety, public support, environmental impact, etc., will be considerations in reaching the decision on which is the preferred alternative.
  1. The requirements of Section 4(f), the Wetland and Floodplain Executive Orders, and the Section 404(b)(1) guidelines will play a critical role in this process.

### Key Points to Remember

- The purpose and need section in the EA/EIS lays out why the proposed action, with its inherent costs and environmental impacts, is being pursued.
  1. If properly described, it limits the range of alternatives which must be considered reasonable, prudent, and practicable in compliance with the CEQ regulations, Section 4(f) the Executive Orders on Wetlands and Floodplains, and the Section 404(b)(1) guidelines.
  2. It demonstrates the problems that will result if the project is not implemented.

- Project Purpose should be stated in just a few sentences.
- The purpose and need section should:
  1. justification of why the improvement must be implemented;
  2. as comprehensive and specific as possible; and,
  3. reexamined and updated as appropriate throughout the project development process.