

# Agency Goals for Advancing Environmental Justice in North Carolina

North Carolina Department of Transportation

## I. GOAL: STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

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### **Background:**

One of the core tenets of Environmental Justice, and a fundamental principle guiding NCDOT actions, is the full and fair participation by all potentially affected communities in Agency decision-making. Low-income populations and minority populations were historically underrepresented in the transportation decision-making process, leading to those populations also being historically underserved by transportation outcomes.

NCDOT takes a proactive approach to engaging historically underrepresented voices throughout project lifecycles. At the beginning of projects, a project-specific public involvement plan is outlined to identify Environmental Justice populations, propose tailored outreach strategies to reach impacted individuals, and key messages. The goal of this effort is to maximize opportunities for meaningful dialogue and involvement early and often. By listening to the needs and concerns of impacted individuals and communities from beginning to end of projects, NCDOT is able to identify and address adverse effects of projects and deliver context-sensitive, community-informed solutions.

The effectiveness of public involvement efforts may be described qualitatively but can be difficult to quantify. For example, data such as number of listening sessions or number of participants does not necessarily reflect quality of efforts, because size, complexity, and location of projects may impact these metrics. Establishing clear quantitative performance metrics helps provide transparency and accountability in measuring the effectiveness of outreach efforts.

### **Objectives:**

- Develop and implement a framework for measuring effectiveness of public engagement.
- Improve the pre-NEPA process to promote earlier identification of EJ stakeholders, earlier opportunities for public participation, and better EJ outcomes.

### **Outcomes:**

- Quantitative scoring of public involvement efforts.
- Improved Agency transparency and accountability for EJ public outreach efforts.
- Earlier engagement allows greater opportunity for vulnerable populations to influence transportation decision-making. This may be difficult to quantify, but may be reflected

in the scoring of public involvement efforts, EJ funding commitments, and mitigation measures.

**Connection to NCDOT Strategic Plan:**

- Goal 4 of NCDOT’s Strategic Plan is to provide excellent customer service.
- Goal 6 of NCDOT’s Strategic Plan is to be a transparent and accountable organization.

## **II. GOAL: IMPROVE SAFETY AND HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR VULNERABLE ROAD USERS**

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**Background:**

Everywhere we go, we are surrounded by transportation infrastructure – transportation features make up the environment that we live, work, worship, learn, play, and grow in. Everyone deserves equal access to a safe environment. However, minority and low-income individuals are more likely to be vulnerable to transportation-related safety risks and inequities, such as:

- Many motor vehicle incidents involving pedestrians and other non-motorized road users occur in areas that have been historically underserved. These areas can lack sidewalk connectivity, curb extensions, bike lanes, crosswalks, sufficient lighting, and other important safety infrastructure measures. Minority and low-income populations are more likely to depend on non-motorized modes as a connector to resources, but less likely to live in highly walkable or bikeable neighborhoods which results in disproportionate safety risk to these populations.
- While human trafficking can happen anywhere, a 2018 survey of human trafficking survivors revealed that 42% of surveyed victims in the United States were trafficked using local or long-distance buses. Train stations, bus stops, and other facilities are key locations used to recruit, meet, or transport victims. The majority of users for these transportation modes are low-income and minority individuals, which makes this an issue of disproportionate transportation safety risk.
- In addition to the prevention of accidental death and harm, safe walkable and bikeable streets and trails also promote an active environment and improved health outcomes, which should be equally accessible to all.

**Objective:**

- Improve safety for vulnerable road users by investing in safety infrastructure, messaging, and community access to safe and affordable transportation modes in historically underserved project areas.

**Outcomes:**

- Reduced rates of pedestrian fatalities
- Reduced accident rates for LEP, minority, and low-income individuals
- Increased project commitments to safety improvements for EJ communities

- Improved public health outcomes

**Connection to NCDOT Strategic Plan:**

- Goal 1 of NCDOT’s Strategic Plan is to Make Transportation Safer.

### **III. GOAL: ELIMINATE DISPARITIES IN ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES AND SERVICES**

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**Background:**

EJ populations are more likely than the general population to rely on public transportation to access essential livelihood services such as work, food, daycare, medical care, education, and other facilities. This can mean inequitable time cost to access basic needs, as well as disparities in access to opportunities altogether. Increasing the reliability and connectivity of public transportation and reducing gaps in service is critical to advancing environmental justice in North Carolina.

**Objective:**

- Develop strategies to eliminate disparities by increasing funding for alternative modes in communities with limited vehicle availability, so that all residents have equitable access to opportunities and services. Strategies may include working with local governments and EJ communities to increase competitiveness of multimodal projects for discretionary grant funding.

**Outcomes:**

- Reduction in travel time disparities between driving and non-driving modes

**Connection to NCDOT Strategic Plan:**

- Goal 2 of NCDOT’s Strategic Plan is to improve the reliability and connectivity of the transportation system.

### **IV. GOAL: MITIGATE CANOPY DESERTS**

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**Background:**

Land use patterns across North Carolina have resulted in deforestation and segmented canopy cover throughout the state. Linear infrastructure such as roads and railways are among the leading drivers of development, linking transportation projects to loss of canopy over time. There are many environmental impacts to deforestation, such as soil erosion, water and air quality impacts, loss of carbon sinks, loss of habitat connectivity, and the phenomenon of heat islands due to lack of shade. Like many other environmental issues, the impacts of historic land-use related deforestation can be disproportionately borne by low-income and minority populations.

**Objective:**

- Research, develop, and implement a reforestation plan lead by NCDOT's Roadside Environmental Unit

**Outcomes:**

- Sequestration of carbon emissions
- Mitigation of heat islands
- Ecological restoration
- A future of environmentally sustainable development practices in transportation

**Connection to NCDOT Strategic Plan:**

- Goal 6 of NCDOT's Strategic Plan is to be a transparent and accountable organization, which includes maintaining our environmental responsibility.

## **V. GOAL: INVEST IN HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES**

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**Background:**

Environmental Justice is not only concerned with equitable distribution of burdens of projects, but also benefits. Transportation improvements bring economic growth to project areas by delivering costly construction activities, improving highway and road capacity, aesthetic improvements, and more. Economic development is a major benefit of projects, and it is critical that low-income and minority communities and community members have equitable access to this benefit. NCDOT programs can provide training, certification, upgrade job skills, grow entrepreneurs, and increase incomes. Adding an Environmental Justice focus to our workforce development programs can aid in expanding access and opportunity for economic growth to all communities while focusing on underserved, overburdened and disadvantaged communities.

**Objectives:**

- Provide technical assistance to Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Rural Planning Organizations to promote improved equity screening in project development and selection to promote equitable distribution of benefits.
- Use Environmental Justice Mapping tool to target On-the-Job Training Academies and other Office of Civil Rights programming more effectively toward minority and low-income communities.
- Advance workforce development programming with a focus on green technology and infrastructure and emerging technologies.
- Continue investigating ways to invest in historically underserved communities in alignment with USDOT's Equity Action Plan and the Justice40 Initiative.

**Outcomes:**

- Deliver economic growth opportunities to EJ communities.

**Connection to NCDOT Strategic Plan:**

- Goal 7 of NCDOT's Strategic Plan is to be a diverse and inclusive organization, which includes diversity spending.