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What is Environmental Justice?

Environmental Justice (EJ): these two words have caused a large amount of stress and are misunderstood by many transportation professionals. So what do they mean, and why is it important for everyone in the transportation field to understand it?

Basically, EJ is about people. It's learning who lives in the community and ensuring that all people, no matter what their race, age, or income, are invited to participate in the project planning process. EJ is about working with the community to determine its needs and how the project fits with those needs. The EJ process should be viewed as an opportunity that can lead to a successful project instead of a hurdle.

The two main components of EJ are Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 12898 (EO) on Environmental Justice. Both of these are rooted in the 14th Amendment, which states that all people are created equal and are entitled to equal protection under

the law. While there are other laws, acts, and executive orders that also deal with some aspect of environmental justice, these two have the most authority and are the touchstones for many other non-discrimination authorities.

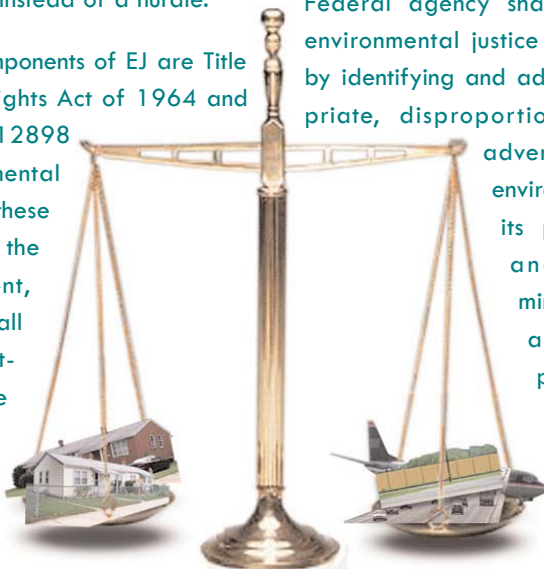
Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states, "No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice states that "each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations." Title VI covers race, color, national origin, sex, age,

and disability, while the EO covers minority and low-income individuals. The biggest difference between the two is that Title VI is a law, while

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the EO is a process. By following the principles of the EO, the requirements of Title VI will be achieved.

How does one begin to identify who lives in a particular project area? Reviewing census data and statistics available for government programs such as Section 8 housing and reduced or free lunch programs in schools can provide valuable insight into the makeup of the project area. Once the background research is compiled, it's time to hit the streets to speak with religious leaders, school officials, and local government representatives. These individuals will provide insightful information about the community's values and needs. In addition to being valuable sources of information, these contacts



can also help disseminate information about the project to the community.

Once you have identified the population in your project area, the next step is to discern the needs of the community and how the project fits with these needs. In other words, try to see things from the community's point of view. Recently at a workshop for transportation professionals on EJ and the transportation planning process, the group was divided into two units: the planners and the community. Each workshop participant was given a role in the community to represent (i.e., aging grandfather, single mother, etc.). The "planners" presented a project to the members of the "community" and asked for input. This workshop aimed to help participants identify with the community as individuals by expressing to the planners how the project affected them. One male workshop participant

who took on the role of a single mother without a car now understands the importance of access to mass transit and how difficult it would be to attend a public meeting without having access to childcare.

In addition to viewing the community through the eyes of its members, you can also ensure that your outreach methods meet the needs of the community by using your contacts, hosting public meetings, taking surveys, and publishing newsletters. From your previous background gathering, you may also know that a portion of the community has Limited English Proficiency (LEP); therefore, it may be necessary to provide translated materials to those individuals. If there are a lot of shift workers in the community, staggering the public meeting times to ensure maximum attendance can increase participation.



Local residents review project details at a public meeting.

Tailoring the public outreach to the needs of the community and involving all members of the community will ensure that the project will proceed in a smooth manner and reduce the chance of the community filing a Title VI lawsuit. It will also ensure that subsequent projects in the community will be faster and easier because of the increased understanding of the community and the rapport already in place.

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<p>Ms. Tartamosa has seven years of experience working on NEPA documentation, socioeconomic analysis and public involvement. This past April, she was invited to participate on a panel entitled, <i>Harnessing the Power of Environmental Justice in the Planning Process</i> at Transaction 2006, the New Jersey State Transportation Conference and Expo.</p>	
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