

# The NEPA Process: Purpose and Need

## What is a Purpose and Need statement?

As part of the NEPA process, project sponsors must establish the “purpose and need” for a proposed project. At the most basic level, the Purpose and Need statement describes why a transportation project is necessary despite its expense and potential environmental impacts. The “purpose” is a broad statement of the primary intended transportation results and other related objectives to be achieved by a proposed transportation improvement, while the “need” identifies the specific transportation problems or deficiencies. Projects developed under review from the Federal Highway Administration must have a transportation purpose and a transportation need.

## What is included in the Purpose and Need statement?

A Purpose and Need statement should be comprehensive while remaining concise and easy to understand. The need for a project should be established using specific data rather than relying on general statements about an issue. Issues discussed in the purpose and need could include transportation demand, capacity, safety, roadway deficiencies, mandated legislation, social demands or economic development that indicate the need to improve or add to the highway capacity, system linkages, modal interrelationships, or others as applicable to the project in question.

Projects with multiple needs may categorize them as Primary and Secondary needs. Primary needs are the key transportation problem(s) that are the real reason(s) the project is being proposed. Some projects will have more than one primary need. Secondary needs are other transportation issues or opportunities for improvement that may be able to be addressed as part of the project. Not all projects have secondary needs.

The document may also discuss Additional Considerations, which are not central to the Purpose and Need, but are important factors that can influence the selection of the preferred alternative. These considerations are discussed separately from the project needs.

## How is a Purpose and Need statement used?

In addition to establishing the reasons for pursuing a project and its importance in the transportation system, the Purpose and Need is also used to identify and determine the range of alternatives that will be evaluated, establish criteria to evaluate those alternatives, and ultimately select the best option. It helps define which alternatives are considered “reasonable, prudent, and practicable,” and allows alternatives that do not meet the Purpose and Need to be dismissed from further consideration.

## How does the Purpose and Need fit into the NEPA process?

While the Purpose and Need for a project should be established early in the process to fulfill the purposes described above, it should be revisited and updated over the course of the environmental process as more information about a project becomes available. For example, additional studies completed as part of the project development process may reveal new environmental issues or counter previous assumptions about commuting patterns, and the purpose and need should be updated to reflect this new information.

### Sources

FHWA Environmental Review Toolkit, NEPA Implementation, The Importance of Purpose and Need in Environmental Documents. September 18, 1990.

[https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/legislation/nepa/guidance\\_purpose\\_need.aspx](https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/legislation/nepa/guidance_purpose_need.aspx)

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FHWA Environmental Review Toolkit, NEPA Implementation, Memorandum: Guidance on “Purpose and Need.” July 23, 2003.

[https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/legislation/nepa/memo\\_purpose\\_need.aspx/](https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/legislation/nepa/memo_purpose_need.aspx/)