FTA Major Capital Transit Investment Fact Sheet

Alternatives Analysis

As defined by law, alternatives analysis (AA) is the first step of the New Starts project development process. AA is the local forum for evaluating the costs, benefits, and impacts of a range of transportation alternatives designed to address mobility problems and other locally-identified objectives in a defined transportation corridor, and for determining which particular investment strategy should be advanced for more focused study and development. For AA studies which may result in the local selection of a project eligible for FTA New Starts or Small Starts funding, the AA further serves as the process for development of the technical information necessary to support a candidate project's into New Starts preliminary engineering. At its core, alternatives analysis – like every step of the New Starts project development process – is about providing the public, local officials, and potential funding partners with sufficient information for the decision-at-hand: that is, "What is the best solution for addressing our problems? What are its benefits? How much is it going to cost? And how are we going to pay for it?"

Alternatives analysis begins with a solid understanding of the transportation problems in need of solving – that is, a corridor's purpose and need. Once known, study sponsors – typically transit agencies, metropolitan planning organizations, or state Departments of Transportation – identify and design a number of capital investment strategies to meet its purpose and need. The definition of these alternatives should reflect a range of high and low cost capital improvements, including non-guideway options which can serve as a "baseline" for measuring the merits of higher level investments. Measures for evaluating the relative merits of alternatives are identified, as are technical methodologies for generating the information used to support such measures; these will typically include disciplines such as travel forecasting, capital and operations and maintenance costing, and environmental and land use analyses. Finally, costs, benefits, and impacts of each alternative are developed and evaluated, funding strategies are analyzed, and a locally preferred alternative (LPA) is selected to be advanced for further development.

Because it involves specialized technical analyses and may result in the selection of an LPA requiring New or Small Starts funding, study sponsors are encouraged to involve FTA early in the study process. Close coordination with FTA, and a commitment to follow FTA guidance for the conduct of the AA study, can improve both the reliability of the information produced and evaluated to better inform local decisionmaking, and facilitate a speedier FTA response to subsequent requests to advance into preliminary engineering.

Guiding Principles of Alternatives Analysis

Planning provides a foundation for effective decisionmaking. Alternatives analysis studies best support local decisionmaking by adhering to the following key principles:

- Early and ongoing participation by a wide range of stakeholders. Alternatives analysis is a local process, but can benefit from the participation of Federal and state resource and funding agencies.
- A clear understanding of the problem in need of solving. The AA should not be about developing solutions in search of a problem.
- Alternatives should be designed – and optimized – to address identified transportation problems and other local goals and objectives.
- The alternatives should share consistent land use, fare, and other assumptions so that their relative costs, benefits and impacts – rather than those of their underlying policy assumptions - are well understood.
- Analysis and evaluation of alternatives at a level of detail necessary to support the decision-at-hand. The AA should produce reliable information that illuminates the trade-offs between alternatives.
- Selection of an LPA based upon full disclosure and understanding of the estimated costs, benefits, and impacts of all alternatives.

For More Information

Advancing Major Transit Investments Through Planning and Project Development

Procedures and Technical Methods for Transit Project Planning (AA Technical Guidance)