

In Context

In Context informs, educates, and creates new ideas on Context Sensitive Solutions

Director's Corner

CSS is not about adding extra features when funds are abundant and ignoring it when they are not. It's about stakeholders working together early on to find common ground, and partnering to find solutions no matter how much the budget is restrained.



Gregg Albright
Director
Caltrans District 5

If we do not employ CSS principles, external stakeholders are more likely to make demands that Caltrans cannot possibly meet. To avoid this, we need to engage stakeholders in a balanced approach that considers all of the issues and strives to find obtainable solutions.

Toward that goal, Caltrans is now working closely with regional transportation agencies to refine project scopes and schedules based on the new budget constraints. Ultimately, we must all take ownership for the budget problems, and share the responsibility to solve them. And CSS principles encourage solutions that are fair, balanced and appropriate.

CSS is here to stay—and it's happening all over the nation. Former Caltrans Director Jeff Morales made a special point to emphasize that CSS—with its collaborative problem-solving principles—is critical to Caltrans' future success. I agree. The environment in which we work demands this kind of approach if we expect to provide leadership in the 21st Century.

Local Partner Discusses CSS

By Cindy Utter

Balancing community interests and values with highway performance and safety is the most important element of Context Sensitive Solutions, according to Ronald DeCarli, executive director of San Luis Obispo Council of Governments.

"We're real champions of CSS concepts," he said, noting they are needed "to secure support for projects and minimize opposition." CSS "gives us the opportunity to address community concerns and integrate them into the projects."

Implementing CSS may seem time consuming and more costly at the front end of a project, he said. However, lack of community integration results in increased costs due to local opposition and project delays—possibly even "killing" an entire project.

CSS requires a "critical shift" between Project Management and the project development teams. Otherwise, local interests may not be considered thoroughly—potentially impacting a project's schedule, cost and viability. "You have to listen to the community."

Occasionally, Caltrans design standards can become an obstacle to CSS, DeCarli said. His agency would like

to "encourage Caltrans to modify the Highway Design Manual to specifically integrate *flexible* design standards to implement CSS concepts for Main Streets and boulevards on State highways as implemented at other DOTs."

Public outreach is an important aspect of CSS. "It's critical to the process," he said. "It's important at the early stage of project conception through design."

At times, key project decisions are made before fully presenting a project to the community for consideration, he said. His agency seeks to pull Caltrans and the community together early in the programming and project delivery process.

SLOCOG is also doing the fol-

lowing regarding CSS: funding scoping studies to evaluate alternatives early in the decision-making process; assessing the opportunities to integrate CSS principles; and conditioning regional funding with both locals and Caltrans to include CSS principles as part of the project development process.

"We're willing to put our money where our mouth is and partner with locals and Caltrans to pay for design treatments."

Part two of this article is in the next issue of In Context



Ronald DeCarli,
Executive Director
SLOCOG

The San Luis Obispo Council of Governments encourages its staff and Caltrans to do the following regarding CSS, according to Executive Director Ronald DeCarli:

- Fully understand the process of how projects emerge to best affect change.
- Actively solicit, address and integrate community concerns and values into the final project.
- Challenge designers and managers to use the flexibility provisions listed in the current Highway Design Manual.
- Monitor the status of all projects and identify opportunities to apply CSS principles as early as possible.
- Create a lessons learned forum discussing elements that went well and those that did not.
- Document good examples for consideration and potential application on other projects.

C S S G e t s P r o j e c t s B u i l t

By Bob Carr
Caltrans, District 5
Landscape Architect

Context Sensitive Solutions –
The latest concept-of-the-month in a long line of vague ideas that will inevitably fade away and be replaced by next month's favored notion.

If that's your first impression of CSS, then you're probably not alone. And why shouldn't you think that? Anyone who has worked for Caltrans for a while can remember many well-intentioned concepts that disappeared just as quickly as they rolled out.

So what makes the CSS "concept-of-the-month" more lasting or valuable than the others?

That's simple: this concept gets projects built. Specifically, CSS principles offer the most efficient strategies for implementing our projects. Once applied, CSS di-

rectly benefits our short-term design development efforts. It also raises the image and credibility of the Department, resulting in higher community acceptance and trust—which enhances our abilities to deliver projects for many years to come.

Is investing in the CSS process worth the effort?

During times of resource shortages, we're required to be more efficient than ever. We're now asked to do more with less and use time even more wisely. With this increased emphasis on efficiency, we need to decide if CSS is of real value or a waste of resources. Consider the following two facts:

- As a transportation agency, one of our primary responsibilities is to meet the public's expectations of providing as many high-quality and needed transportation improvements as possible.

- Community dissatisfaction can and does stop projects. The citizens we serve are knowledgeable consumers of the transportation "goods" we provide. They also have a high level of concern for quality of life issues.

CSS is the best way to increase community satisfaction with our projects. CSS does not mean we have to "sell the farm" or pay for wish-list features beyond our responsibilities. It also does not mean reducing our design and safety standards.

Rather, CSS means providing good communication. It involves taking the time to understand the concerns of those affected by our work as well as understanding and defining our own core issues—regardless of the function we work in.

Early communication and stakeholder involvement might initially seem like an inefficient use of time and effort, but much

greater costs are involved with lengthy stakeholder stalemates or major project redesigns. On the Central Coast, we have learned that lesson many times.

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Words of Wisdom

"If you just communicate, you can get by. But, if you skillfully communicate, you can work miracles."

—Jim Rohn
speaker and author
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To find out more about CSS, visit the Project for Public spaces website at <http://www.pps.org/CSS/cssonline.htm>.



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