

MnDOT's Traffic Impact Study Requirements

By Mike Spack, PE

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The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) adopted a new Access Management Manual this year containing policies which will impact medium to large scale development projects proposed near one of their highways, whether or not the developer seeks direct access. A key component of this new policy is a Traffic Impact Study process. This process will likely add time to the approval process but can foster increased jurisdictional cooperation beneficial to projects where traffic impacts and access are a key concern.

The good news is that projects generating less than 250 rush hour trips are exempt from the process (this threshold is roughly 250 dwelling units, 15,000 square feet of commercial/retail, 165,000 square feet of office, or 460,000 square feet of industrial). The bad news, of course, is MnDOT has a few clauses giving them leeway if they want a traffic study done for a development below these thresholds. The ugly news, based on our experience, is the process can take three to twelve months longer than the previous process. Developers need to be aware of this and have their traffic engineer start earlier in the development process. The Traffic Impact Study process will usually occur as part of a larger environmental study (EAW, EIS, or AUAR), but the project may need to include a study even if it is exempt from environmental review.

Can they do that?

It should be noted that MnDOT has no authority to require a Traffic Impact Study unless the development is requesting a direct connection to the highway system under their jurisdiction. But, MnDOT has standardized their traffic review process hoping to increase cooperation with local government units. The local government unit, typically a city (but it could be a county if the development is outside of city boundaries), has the legal authority to require a Traffic Impact Study through their approval process. MnDOT is hoping local government units will agree with their new policy and implement it as part of their development review process even where the development does not require direct access to the trunk highway system.

Why does this add time?

MnDOT is hoping for a more collaborative process under their new policy. This means more review time and coordination with an already stretched MnDOT staff. In the past, a traffic engineer would prepare a study and the local government unit would send it to MnDOT for review. Sometimes the traffic engineer would sit down with MnDOT staff at the beginning of the process to discuss the scope of the study. Chapter 5 of the new MnDOT Access Management Manual requires the following standardized multi-step process

requiring meetings between MnDOT, Local Agencies, the Developer and the Traffic Consultant:

1. Meeting 1 – Develop the scope of the study.
2. Meeting 2 - Discuss the traffic analyses that have been performed by the Traffic Consultant and identify possible mitigation strategies.
3. Meeting 3 - Discuss the mitigation strategies that have been analyzed.
4. Meeting 4 – Discuss the findings and conclusions.
5. Meeting 5 – Agree upon the recommendations.

In a perfect world, most of these steps could be completed without actual face-to-face meetings (perhaps using email or conference calls). But, because of workload and availability, each one of these steps can take additional weeks or months. Following are recent examples of projects that have complied with the Traffic Impact Study process.

Case 1 – Astra Village

Astra Village is a 150 acre mixed use project at Highway 610 and Zane Avenue in Brooklyn Park. It is proposed to contain approximately 1,924,000 square feet of office space, 800 attached housing units, 300 attached senior housing units, 92,000 square feet of commercial/retail space, and 150 hotel rooms. Mike prepared a traffic study in 2008 as part of the approved EIS for the project. This is a positive example of collaboration between MnDOT and local agencies. Brooklyn Park engineering staff decided to loosely follow MnDOT's process and had several meetings with MnDOT and Hennepin County staff to work through the traffic study scope, analyses, and mitigation plan. Although MnDOT wanted a more extensive traffic modeling effort than what was ultimately determined necessary by Brooklyn Park staff, MnDOT and Hennepin County accepted the Traffic Impact Study at the end of the process and the EIS was approved by Brooklyn Park. This collaboration took approximately six months, but was integral to developing a traffic mitigation plan acceptable to MnDOT, Hennepin County, and Brooklyn Park.

Case 2 – Elk Run

Elk Run is a 2,300 acre mixed use project adjacent to Highway 52 in Pine Island. An AUAR was prepared for approximately 5,100 acres planned to contain a 1,700,000 square foot bio-science park, approximately 1,500,000 square feet of commercial/retail space, over 1,500 single family homes, a new high school, and a 75 acre healthy living campus. An EIS was previously prepared for the Highway 52 corridor through Pine Island and Oronoco, but it did not envision the intensity of development proposed in Elk Run. The new interchange recommended in the EIS is a large contributing factor in the higher density envisioned in Elk Run. Mike prepared a traffic study in 2007 that was part of the approved AUAR prepared for the project.

The MnDOT Traffic Impact Study policy was in draft form when the study was performed, but the process was followed. It was one of the first times MnDOT

followed the process and there was a significant learning curve. Multiple e-mail reviews and more than five meetings extended the review process to over a year. The City of Pine Island decided to develop a short term mitigation plan to allow the first phase of Elk Run to proceed because its traffic impacts were manageable with minor improvements. MnDOT objected to the AUAR and this plan at the end of the Traffic Impact Study process because they wanted the long term mitigation plan to be developed and funded at the outset. Pine Island moved forward with the short term mitigation plan to allow Elk Run to break ground, but worked with MnDOT to develop a near term mitigation plan that protected the motoring public while allowing Elk Run to begin. Part of their agreement included working together to revise the Highway 52 corridor EIS to account for the increased density proposed in Elk Run and working together on a different interchange scheme in Pine Island to accommodate Elk Run. In this case, the Traffic Impact Study process probably didn't resolve the traffic issues in a different manner than the older, less collaborative process because of the learning curve. The process added time to the approval process, but the collaboration ultimately resulted in an approved development plan.

Case 3 – Hay Days

Hay Days is a snowmobile race and swap meet event held annually on the second weekend in September. It is recognized as the world's largest snowmobiling event and draws approximately 32,000 spectators over the course of the weekend. The Sno Barons Snowmobile Club has proposed moving Hay Days from its current location in the City of Columbus to a location in northeastern Chisago County. An EAW was prepared for the project and ultimately approved by Chisago County (the local government unit since the site is outside of a city). One of the largest environmental impacts of the project is the traffic impact the event traffic will have throughout Chisago County. Mike prepared the traffic study component of the EAW.

A traffic engineering task force was developed with the traffic engineering consultant, Chisago County, MnDOT, and City of North Branch staff to work through the Traffic Impact Study process. Several meetings were held to develop the traffic study scope, go through the traffic analyses, and develop a mitigation plan. This added approximately a year to the normal development process. MnDOT's official comment letter regarding the EAW, submitted after the Traffic Impact Study process was concluded, questioned several of the analyses that were previously agreed to by the task force. However the county engineering staff was comfortable moving ahead with the Traffic Impact Study and mitigation plan because of the lengthy collaborative efforts. The EAW was approved and an EIS was not required. Even though MnDOT didn't fully agree with the Traffic Impact Study, the process was successful in that it resulted in staff support of the traffic mitigation plan.

Conclusions

MnDOT has developed a new Traffic Impact Study process they would like all medium and large size developments to follow. Unless the development is requesting direct access to a MnDOT controlled roadway, following this process is voluntary and up to the discretion of the local governmental unit.

Transportation concerns are usually significant with large scale projects and require significant intergovernmental cooperation to gain development approvals. MnDOT's Traffic Impact Study process is a guide for how to achieve those approvals, however as pointed out in the above case studies, consensus is not always reached. If your development will have significant transportation impacts, it is recommended you start the Traffic Impact Study process as soon as practical with your traffic engineering consultant. MnDOT's new process adds time to the approval process.