

3. NOISE IMPACT CRITERIA

This chapter presents the criteria to be used in evaluating noise impact from mass transit projects. In general terms, these criteria describe the noise environment considered acceptable for a given situation. Because some projects are strictly transit projects while other projects are basically highway projects that include a transit component, two different sets of criteria are required as follows:

- **Rail and Bus Facilities:** This category includes all rail projects (e.g., rail rapid transit, light rail transit, commuter rail, and automated guideway transit), as well as fixed facilities such as storage and maintenance yards, passenger stations and terminals, parking facilities, substations, etc. Also included are rail transit projects built within a highway or railroad corridor. Certain bus facilities are included in this category, such as separate roadways built exclusively for buses, and bus operations on local streets and highways where the project does not include roadway construction or modification that significantly changes roadway capacity. The distinguishing feature in all these cases is that the existing noise levels are generated by roadway traffic and other sources that will not change as a result of the project; therefore the project noise is exclusively due to the new transit sources.
- **Highway/Transit Projects:** Projects in this category involve new highway construction or modifications to existing highways to increase carrying capacity. The project would involve preferential treatment for buses or high-occupancy vehicles (HOV). The distinguishing feature here is that the *project* noise includes a combination of highway and transit sources. Examples are: new highway construction providing general-purpose lanes as well as dedicated bus/HOV lanes and lane additions or reconfigurations on existing highways to accommodate buses/HOVs.

The noise impact criteria for rail and bus facilities are presented in Section 3.1. These criteria were developed specifically for transit noise sources operating on fixed guideways or at fixed facilities. The criterion for the onset of Impact varies according to the existing noise level and the predicted project noise level, and is determined by the threshold at which the percentage of people highly annoyed by the project noise starts to become measurable. The corresponding criterion for Severe Impact similarly varies according to the existing noise level as well as the project noise level, but is determined by a higher, more significant

percentage of people highly annoyed by project noise. Guidelines for the application of the criteria are included in Section 3.2, and background material on the development of the criteria are included in Appendix A.

For transit projects integrated with an existing or newly-constructed highway, such as HOV lanes or exclusive bus lanes, the determination of noise impact is based on existing Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) noise prediction procedures and impact criteria, as summarized in Section 3.3 of this chapter. The latter criteria are used to maintain consistency with established noise impact assessment methods for projects that involve modifications to existing roadways or the construction of new roadways.

3.1 NOISE IMPACT CRITERIA FOR TRANSIT PROJECTS

The noise impact criteria for mass transit projects involving rail or bus facilities are shown graphically in Figure 3-1 and are tabulated in Table 3-1. The equations used to define these criteria are included in Appendix A. The criteria apply to all rail projects (e.g., rail rapid transit, light rail transit, commuter rail, and automated guideway transit) as well as fixed facilities such as storage and maintenance yards, passenger stations and terminals, parking facilities, and substations. They may also be used for bus projects operating on local streets and separate roadways built exclusively for buses. In contrast, for busways and HOV lanes which are to be integrated in existing highways (e.g., the addition of new lanes or the redesignation of existing lanes on a highway), the FHWA's noise abatement criteria contained in Federal-Aid Highway Program Manual 7-7-3 are the appropriate noise criteria to use. Likewise, if the project is a new highway involving both general-purpose and dedicated bus/HOV lanes, the FHWA approach is followed. The FHWA criteria are briefly summarized in Section 3.3.

3.1.1 Basis of Noise Impact Criteria

The noise impact criteria in Figure 3-1 and Table 3-1 are based on comparison of the existing outdoor noise levels and the future outdoor noise levels from the proposed project. They incorporate both absolute criteria, which consider activity interference caused by the transit project alone, and relative criteria, which consider annoyance due to the change in the noise environment caused by the transit project.

Whereas noise impact criteria that have been used for previous transit projects take existing ambient noise levels into account based on generalized community categories, the criteria in this manual depend on specific estimates of existing community noise levels as part of the determination of noise impact. These criteria were developed to apply to various transit modes, to recognize the heightened community annoyance caused by late-night or early-morning transit service, and to respond to the varying sensitivity of communities to projects under different background noise conditions.

The noise criteria and descriptors depend on land use, as defined in Table 3-2. Further guidance on the definition of land use, the selection of the appropriate noise metric and the application of the criteria is given in Section 3.2 of this chapter, with more detailed guidelines given in Chapters 5 and 6.

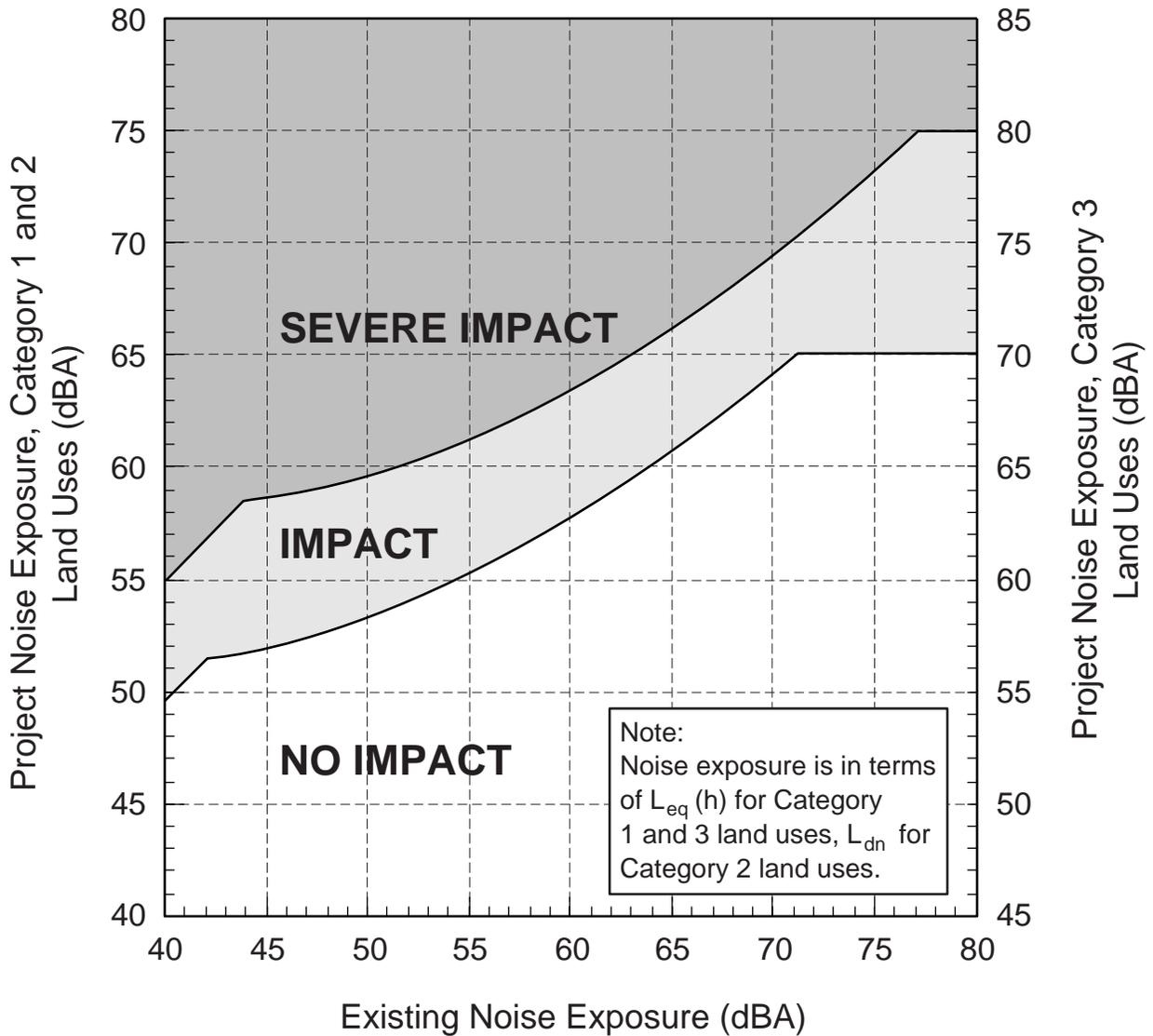


Figure 3-1 Noise Impact Criteria for Transit Projects

Table 3-1 Noise Levels Defining Impact for Transit Projects						
Existing Noise Exposure* L _{eq} (h) or L _{dn} (dBA)	Project Noise Impact Exposure,* L_{eq}(h) or L_{dn}(dBA)					
	Category 1 or 2 Sites			Category 3 Sites		
	No Impact	Impact	Severe Impact	No Impact	Impact	Severe Impact
<43	< Ambient+10	Ambient + 10 to 15	>Ambient+15	<Ambient+15	Ambient + 15 to 20	>Ambient+20
43	<52	52-58	>58	<57	57-63	>63
44	<52	52-58	>58	<57	57-63	>63
45	<52	52-58	>58	<57	57-63	>63
46	<53	53-59	>59	<58	58-64	>64
47	<53	53-59	>59	<58	58-64	>64
48	<53	53-59	>59	<58	58-64	>64
49	<54	54-59	>59	<59	59-64	>64
50	<54	54-59	>59	<59	59-64	>64
51	<54	54-60	>60	<59	59-65	>65
52	<55	55-60	>60	<60	60-65	>65
53	<55	55-60	>60	<60	60-65	>65
54	<55	55-61	>61	<60	60-66	>66
55	<56	56-61	>61	<61	61-66	>66
56	<56	56-62	>62	<61	61-67	>67
57	<57	57-62	>62	<62	62-67	>67
58	<57	57-62	>62	<62	62-67	>67
59	<58	58-63	>63	<63	63-68	>68
60	<58	58-63	>63	<63	63-68	>68
61	<59	59-64	>64	<64	64-69	>69
62	<59	59-64	>64	<64	64-69	>69
63	<60	60-65	>65	<65	65-70	>70
64	<61	61-65	>65	<66	66-70	>70
65	<61	61-66	>66	<66	66-71	>71
66	<62	62-67	>67	<67	67-72	>72
67	<63	63-67	>67	<68	68-72	>72
68	<63	63-68	>68	<68	68-73	>73
69	<64	64-69	>69	<69	69-74	>74
70	<65	65-69	>69	<70	70-74	>74
71	<66	66-70	>70	<71	71-75	>75
72	<66	66-71	>71	<71	71-76	>76
73	<66	66-71	>71	<71	71-76	>76
74	<66	66-72	>72	<71	71-77	>77
75	<66	66-73	>73	<71	71-78	>78
76	<66	66-74	>74	<71	71-79	>79
77	<66	66-74	>74	<71	71-79	>79
>77	<66	66-75	>75	<71	71-80	>80

* L_{dn} is used for land use where nighttime sensitivity is a factor; L_{eq} during the hour of maximum transit noise exposure is used for land use involving only daytime activities.

Land Use Category	Noise Metric (dBA)	Description of Land Use Category
1	Outdoor $L_{eq}(h)^*$	Tracts of land where quiet is an essential element in their intended purpose. This category includes lands set aside for serenity and quiet, and such land uses as outdoor amphitheaters and concert pavilions, as well as National Historic Landmarks with significant outdoor use.
2	Outdoor L_{dn}	Residences and buildings where people normally sleep. This category includes homes, hospitals and hotels where a nighttime sensitivity to noise is assumed to be of utmost importance.
3	Outdoor $L_{eq}(h)^*$	Institutional land uses with primarily daytime and evening use. This category includes schools, libraries, and churches where it is important to avoid interference with such activities as speech, meditation and concentration on reading material. Buildings with interior spaces where quiet is important, such as medical offices, conference rooms, recording studios and concert halls fall into this category. Places for meditation or study associated with cemeteries, monuments, museums. Certain historical sites, parks and recreational facilities are also included.
* L_{eq} for the noisiest hour of transit-related activity during hours of noise sensitivity.		

3.1.2 Defining the Levels of Impact

The noise impact criteria are defined by two curves which allow increasing project noise levels as existing noise increases up to a point, beyond which impact is determined based on project noise alone. Below the lower curve in Figure 3-1, a proposed project is considered to have no noise impact since, on the average, the introduction of the project will result in an insignificant increase in the number of people highly annoyed by the new noise. The curve defining the onset of noise impact stops increasing at 65 dB for Category 1 and 2 land use, a standard limit for an acceptable living environment defined by a number of Federal agencies. Project noise above the upper curve is considered to cause Severe Impact since a significant percentage of people would be highly annoyed by the new noise. This curve flattens out at 75 dB for Category 1 and 2 land use, a level associated with an unacceptable living environment. As indicated by the right-hand scale on Figure 3-1, the project noise criteria are 5 decibels higher for Category 3 land uses since these types of land use are considered to be slightly less sensitive to noise than the types of land use in categories 1 and 2.

Between the two curves the proposed project is judged to have an impact, though not severe. The change in the cumulative noise level is noticeable to most people, but may not be sufficient to cause strong, adverse reactions from the community. In this transitional area, other project-specific factors must be considered to determine the magnitude of the impact and the need for mitigation, such as the predicted level of increase over existing noise levels and the types and numbers of noise-sensitive land uses affected.

Although the curves in Figure 3-1 are defined in terms of the project noise exposure and the existing noise exposure, it is important to emphasize that it is the increase in the cumulative noise – when project is added to existing – that is the basis for the criteria. The complex shapes of the curves are based on the

considerations of cumulative noise increase described in Appendix A. To illustrate this point, Figure 3-2 shows the noise impact criteria for Category 1 and 2 land use in terms of the allowable increase in the cumulative noise exposure. The horizontal axis is the existing noise exposure and the vertical axis is the increase in cumulative noise level due to the transit project. The measure of noise exposure is L_{dn} for residential areas and L_{eq} for land uses that do not have nighttime noise sensitivity. Since L_{dn} and L_{eq} are measures of total acoustic energy, any new noise source in a community will cause an increase, even if the new source level is less than the existing level. Referring to Figure 3-2, it can be seen that the criterion for Impact allows a noise exposure increase of 10 dBA if the existing noise exposure is 42 dBA or less but only a 1 dBA increase when the existing noise exposure is 70 dBA.

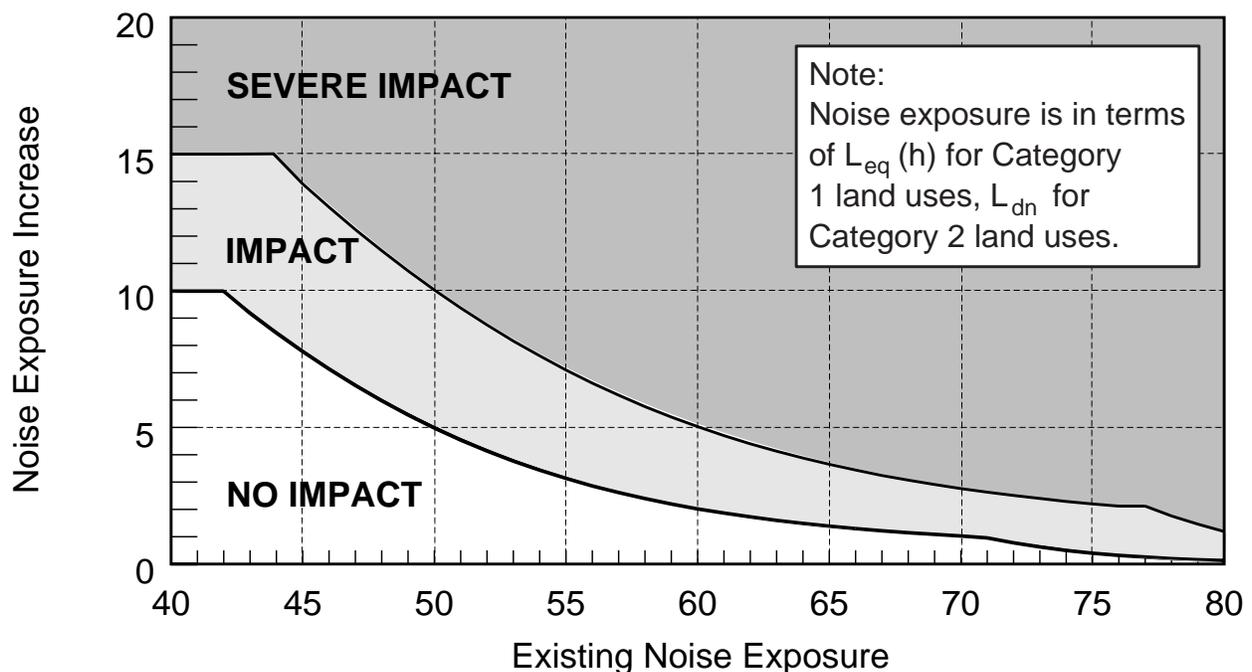


Figure 3-2 Increase in Cumulative Noise Levels Allowed by Criteria (Land Use Cat. 1 & 2)

As the existing level of ambient noise increases, the allowable level of transit noise increases, but the total amount that community noise exposure is allowed to increase is reduced. This accounts for the unexpected result that a project noise exposure which is less than the existing noise exposure can still cause Impact. This is clearer from the examples given in Table 3-3 which indicate the level of transit noise allowed for different existing levels of exposure.

L_{dn} or L_{eq} in dBA (rounded to nearest whole decibel)			
Existing Noise Exposure	Allowable Project Noise Exposure	Allowable Combined Total Noise Exposure	Allowable Noise Exposure Increase
45	51	52	7
50	53	55	5
55	55	58	3
60	57	62	2
65	60	66	1
70	64	71	1
75	65	75	0

Any increase greater than shown above in Table 3-3 will cause Impact. This table shows that as the existing noise exposure increases from 45 dBA to 75 dBA, the allowed transit noise exposure increases from 51 dBA to 65 dBA. However, the allowed increase in the cumulative noise level decreases from 7 dBA to 0 dBA (rounded to the nearest whole decibel). The justification for this is that people already exposed to high levels of noise will notice and be annoyed by only a small increase in the amount of noise in their community. In contrast, if the existing noise levels are quite low, a greater change in the community noise will be required for the equivalent level of annoyance. It should be noted that these annoyance levels are based on general community reactions to noise at varying levels which have been documented in scientific literature and do not account for specific community attitudinal factors which may exist.

3.2 APPLICATION OF NOISE IMPACT CRITERIA

3.2.1 Noise-Sensitive Land Uses

As indicated in Section 3.1.1, the noise impact criteria and descriptors depend on land use, designated either Category 1, Category 2 or Category 3. Category 1 includes tracts of land where quiet is an essential element in their intended purpose, such as outdoor concert pavilions or National Historic Landmarks where outdoor interpretation routinely takes place. Category 2 includes residences and buildings where people sleep, while Category 3 includes institutional land uses with primarily daytime and evening use such as schools, places of worship and libraries.

The criteria do not apply to most commercial or industrial uses because, in general, the activities within these buildings are compatible with higher noise levels. They do apply to business uses which depend on quiet as an important part of operations, such as sound and motion picture recording studios.

Historically significant sites are treated as noise-sensitive depending on the land use activities. Sites of national significance with considerable outdoor use required for site interpretation would be in Category 1.

Historical sites that are currently used as residences will be in Category 2. Historic buildings with indoor use of an interpretive nature involving meditation and study fall into Category 3. These include museums, significant birthplaces and buildings in which significant historical events occurred.

Most busy downtown areas have buildings which are historically significant because they represent a particular architectural style or are prime examples of the work of an historically significant designer. If the buildings or structures are used for commercial or industrial purposes and are located in busy commercial areas, they are not considered noise-sensitive and the noise impact criteria do not apply. Similarly, historical transportation structures, such as terminals and railroad stations, are not considered noise-sensitive land uses themselves. These buildings or structures are, of course, afforded special protection under Section 4(f) of the DOT Act and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. However, based strictly on how they are used and the settings in which they are located, these types of historical buildings are not considered noise-sensitive sites.

While parks are considered in general to be noise-sensitive sites, there are cases where actual noise-sensitivity depends on how the park is being used. Parks used for passive purposes such as reading, meditation and conversation would be considered more noise sensitive than ones used for sports or other active recreational pursuits.

3.2.2 Noise Metrics

The basis for the development of the noise impact criteria (see Appendix A) has been the relationship between the percentage of highly annoyed people and the noise levels of their residential environment. Consequently, the criteria are centered around residential land use with the use of L_{dn} as the noise descriptor sensitive to noise intrusion at night. The noise criteria use L_{dn} for other land uses where nighttime sensitivity is a factor. The criteria are also to be applied to non-residential land uses that are sensitive to noise during daytime hours. Because the L_{dn} and the maximum daytime hourly L_{eq} have similar values for a typical noise environment, the daytime or early evening L_{eq} can be used for evaluating noise impact at locations where nighttime sensitivity is not a factor. For land use involving only daytime activities (e.g. churches, schools, libraries, parks) the impact is evaluated in terms of $L_{eq}(h)$, defined as the L_{eq} for the noisiest hour of transit-related activity during which human activities occur at the noise-sensitive location.

However, due to the types of land use included in Category 3, the criteria allow the project noise for Category 3 sites to be 5 decibels greater than for Category 1 and Category 2 sites. With the exception of recreational facilities, which are clearly less sensitive to noise than Category 1 and 2 sites, Category 3 sites include primarily indoor activities and thus the criteria account for the noise reduction provided by the building structure.

Although the maximum noise level (L_{max}) is not used in this manual as the basis for the noise impact criteria for transit projects, it is a useful metric for providing a fuller understanding of the noise impact from some transit operations. Specifically, rail transit characteristically produces high intermittent noise levels which may be objectionable depending on the distance from the alignment. Thus, it is recommended that L_{max} information be provided in environmental documents to supplement the noise impact assessment and to help

satisfy the "full disclosure" requirements of NEPA. Procedures for computing the L_{\max} for a single train passby are provided in Appendix E.

3.2.3 Considerations in Applying the Noise Impact Criteria

The procedure for assessing impact is to determine the existing noise exposure and the predicted project noise exposure at a given site, in terms of either L_{dn} or $L_{eq}(h)$ as appropriate, and to plot these levels on Figure 3-1. The location of the plotted point in the three impact ranges is an indication of the magnitude of the impact. For simplicity, noise impact can also be determined by using Table 3-1, rounding all noise level values to the nearest whole decibel before using the table. This level of precision is sufficient for determining the degree of noise impact at specific locations and should be adequate for most applications. However, a more precise determination of noise impact may be appropriate in some situations, such as when estimating the distance from the project to which noise impact extends. In such cases, more precise noise limits can be determined using the criteria equations provided in Appendix A.

The noise criteria are to be applied outside the *building locations* for residential land use and at the *property line* for parks and other significant outdoor use. However, for locations where land use activity is solely indoors, noise impact may be less significant if the outdoor-to-indoor reduction is greater than for typical buildings (about 25 dB with windows closed). Thus, if the project sponsor can demonstrate that this is the case, mitigation may not be needed.

It is important to note that the criteria specify a comparison of future project noise with existing noise and *not* with projections of future "no-build" noise exposure (i.e. without the project). Furthermore, it should be emphasized that it is not necessary nor recommended that existing noise exposure be determined by measuring at every noise-sensitive location in the project area. Rather, the recommended approach is to characterize the noise environment for "clusters" of sites based on measurements or estimates at representative locations in the community. In view of the sensitivity of the noise criteria to the existing noise exposure, careful characterization of pre-project ambient noise is important. Guidelines for selecting representative receiver locations and determining ambient noise are provided in Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively.

3.2.4 Mitigation Policy Considerations

The Federal Transit Administration does not have a specific noise mitigation policy embodied in a regulation. Rather, the following statutes and implementing regulations concerning environmental protection guide the agency's decision on the need for noise mitigation. While many people are familiar with the environmental impact statement requirement in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the statute also establishes a broad mandate for Federal agencies to incorporate environmental protection and enhancement measures into the programs and projects they help finance.⁽¹⁾ In conjunction with FHWA, FTA has issued a regulation implementing NEPA which sets out the agencies' general policy on environmental mitigation. There, it states that measures necessary to mitigate adverse impacts are to be incorporated into the project and, further, that such measures are eligible for Federal funding when FTA determines that "...the

proposed mitigation represents a reasonable public expenditure after considering the impacts of the action and the benefits of the proposed mitigation measures."⁽²⁾

While NEPA provides broad direction, a more explicit statutory basis for mitigating adverse noise impacts is contained in the Federal Transit Laws.⁽³⁾ Before approving a construction grant under section 5309, FTA must make a finding that "... (ii) the preservation and enhancement of the environment, and the interest of the community in which a project is located, were considered; and (iii) no adverse environmental effect is likely to result from the project, or no feasible and prudent alternative to the effect exists and all reasonable steps have been taken to minimize the effect." (49 U.S.C. 5324 (b) (3)).

3.3 NOISE IMPACT CRITERIA FOR HIGHWAY/TRANSIT PROJECTS

When mass transit projects are integrated with modified or newly-constructed highways (e.g., exclusive bus/HOV lanes constructed within or alongside a highway), noise impact should be determined using existing FHWA assessment procedures and noise abatement guidelines.

FHWA criteria appear in the Code of Federal Regulations⁽⁴⁾ and are supplemented by several FHWA advisory memoranda (references 5 through 11). FHWA noise policies and guidelines are expected to be updated and reissued during 1995. The following sections summarize these criteria and their use.

3.3.1 FHWA Impact Criteria

FHWA requires assessment at affected existing activities, developed lands, and undeveloped lands for which development is planned, designed and programmed. At these locations, traffic noise is computed for the project's design year, which is often 20 years from the onset of environmental studies. Used for this computation is traffic for the hour with the worst impact "on a regular basis." In practice, traffic engineers often predict traffic volumes and speeds at several times during an average design-year day, and then noise computations decide the "worst" hour. Because assessment is for a single hour rather than for a 24-hour period, the noise metric is an hourly one. FHWA allows either $L_{eq}(h)$ or $L_{10}(h)$.*

FHWA requires two assessments of noise impact: one related to land-use type and the other to existing noise level. First, noise impact occurs when predicted traffic noise levels approach or exceed the applicable Noise Abatement Criteria (NAC) in Table 3-4. FHWA allows individual state highway agencies to define "approach," as long as it is at least one decibel less than the applicable NAC.

In this table, FHWA requires that primary consideration be given to exterior areas (Activity Categories A, B and C). The table's interior NAC (Category E) is used only where either (1) there are no affected exterior activities or (2) exterior activities are not impacted because they are far from or are physically shielded from the roadway.

* $L_{10}(h)$ is defined as the A-weighted sound level exceeded for 10% of the hour.

Table 3-4 FHWA Noise Abatement Criteria			
Activity Category	Hourly A-weighted Sound Level (dBA)		Description of Activity Category
	$L_{eq}(h)$	$L_{10}(h)$	
A	57 Exterior	60 Exterior	Lands on which serenity and quiet are of extraordinary significance and serve an important public need and where the preservation of those qualities is essential if the area is to continue to serve its intended purpose.
B	67 Exterior	70 Exterior	Picnic areas, recreation areas, playgrounds, active sports areas, parks, residences, motels, hotels, schools, churches, libraries, and hospitals.
C	72 Exterior	75 Exterior	Developed lands, properties, or activities not included in Categories A or B above.
D	--	--	Undeveloped lands.
E	52 Interior	55 Interior	Residences, motels, hotels, public meeting rooms, schools, churches, libraries, hospitals, and auditoriums.

In addition, noise impact is considered to occur when predicted traffic noise levels substantially exceed existing noise levels (not future no-build noise levels). FHWA allows individual state highway agencies to define "substantial." Most states consider an increase of 10-15 decibels to be substantial.

3.3.2 Use of Impact Criteria

When impact occurs by either method of assessment, NAC or substantial increase, FHWA requires study of the following noise abatement measures: traffic management, alteration of horizontal and vertical alignments, noise barriers whether within or outside the right-of-way, acquisition of buffer zones, noise insulation of public-use or nonprofit institutional structures. Measures which are reasonable and feasible are to be incorporated in the project.

Feasibility. Feasibility deals with engineering considerations. To be feasible, an abatement measure must first meet all safety, maintenance and other accepted design requirements. After safety/maintenance issues are resolved – they usually can during detailed design, according to FHWA – then FHWA considers a noise-abatement measure to be feasible if that measure can technically achieve a noise reduction of 5 decibels or more, given its physical aspects and those of its surroundings. Such acoustical feasibility is objective, not subjective. It is a matter of acoustical computation, depending upon such factors as topography, location of other nearby sound sources, and location of driveways, ramps, and cross streets.

Reasonableness. In the context of FHWA regulations, reasonableness is a more subjective matter. Reasonableness implies that common sense and good judgment were applied in arriving at a decision concerning the abatement measure. Explicitly, FHWA requires that (1) the views of the impacted residents

be a major consideration, and (2) the overall noise abatement benefits outweigh the overall adverse social, economic, and environmental effects, as well as the abatement cost.

Reasonableness also depends upon community wishes, aesthetics, community desires for their surrounding view, projected noise-level increase above existing levels, projected noise-level increase above no-build levels, amount of development that occurred before and after the initial construction of the highway, type of protected development, effectiveness of land-use controls by local jurisdiction, construction effects of the abatement measure on the natural environment, and the potential ability of the abatement measure to reduce noise during project construction, as well.

Reasonableness also depends upon cost effectiveness. It encourages state highway agencies to develop quantitative cost-effectiveness guidelines, which generally consider abatement cost, the number of people protected by the abatement measure, and the amount of noise reduction provided by the abatement measure.

Noise insulation of private residences. As mentioned above, FHWA participates in funding "noise insulation of public use or nonprofit institutional structures." On the other hand, noise insulation of private residences is not normally funded by FHWA. Instead, the agency acknowledges that there may be situations where (1) severe traffic noise impacts exist or are expected, and (2) the abatement measures listed above are physically infeasible or economically unreasonable. In these instances, noise abatement measures other than those listed may be proposed by the highway agency and approved by the FHWA on a case-by-case basis.

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3. 49 U.S.C. 5301 et seq.
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5. Ali F. Sevin, Director, Office of Environmental Policy, (now the Office of Environment and Planning), Federal Highway Administration, "Memorandum: Traffic Noise Analysis for Highway Projects Which Add Through-Traffic Lanes." 5 May 1987.
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