

Atlanta Regional Commission Case Study



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prepared by the



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Case Study

In 2017, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) allocated funding to the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC)¹ to implement INVEST Version 1.2 (Infrastructure Voluntary Evaluation Sustainability Tool), and gather lessons learned. The general objective of this scope of work was to conduct a thorough comparison and analysis of different ARC decision support tools with the INVEST Project Development (PD) module criteria. Each of the four ARC tools included in the comparison were originally planned to analyze or assess environmental impacts, potential scope of anticipated NEPA review, and project deliverability of proposed transportation projects. Because the objectives of the implementation were to compare the ARC tools with the INVEST PD module, and then enhance them with INVEST criteria, ARC did not conduct any INVEST scoring. Instead, the Final Report provides a detailed analysis on the comparison between INVEST PD criteria and the four planning tools, as well as a discussion of how ARC incorporated the INVEST PD criteria through its existing tools and its planning process. The ARC tools that were evaluated are the:

- Project Environmental Screening Tool;
- Project Risk Assessment Tool;
- Project Deliverability Assessment; and
- Transportation Improvement Program Project Evaluation Framework.

Project Environmental Screening Tool

The Project Environmental Screening Tool is a geospatial analytical tool used by ARC to identify potential environmental impact to critical resources, as well as to identify regional strategies for promoting avoidance, mitigation, and sustainability. The tool calculates both total acreages of impact for each layer and percent of the total project buffer area impacting each layer.

Project Risk Assessment Tool

The Risk Assessment Tool was developed in 2016 and allows project sponsors to score their proposed projects against multiple risk factors that are attributed to project delivery delay and the overall regional implementation rate. The output of the Risk Assessment Tool is a composite score indicating the potential risk of delivering the project through the federal-aid program, as currently defined and scoped, on time and within the anticipated budget.

Project Deliverability Assessment

The Project Deliverability Assessment is a component of ARC's overall TIP project prioritization framework and project selection process for federal funding that is allocated to ARC. It is intended to identify possible barriers in delivery and enable ARC, GDOT and sponsors to determine a realistic schedule and cost, or in some cases, how possible impacts can be avoided prior to the project being added to the TIP.

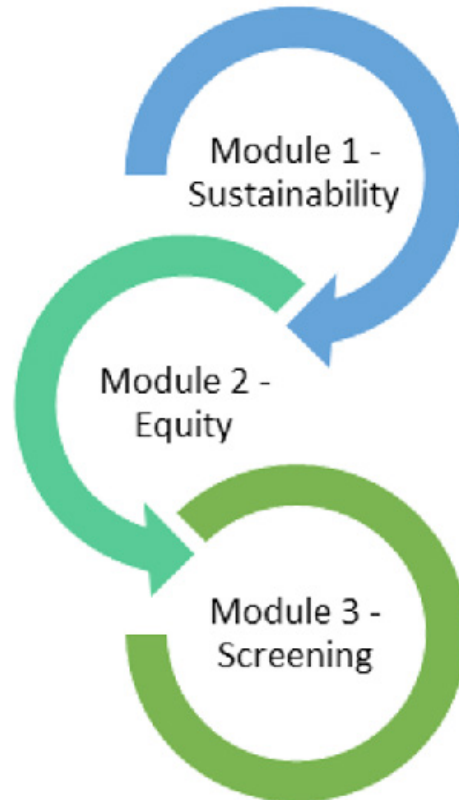
Transportation Improvement Program Project Evaluation Framework

The Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) Performance Evaluation Framework (adopted in 2017, subsequent to the INVEST grant allocation) is a performance-based project evaluation process, developed with the assistance of a SHRP Implementation assistance grant. One of the performance criterion involves measuring the potential impact of a project on cultural and environmental resources.

¹ ARC is the Metropolitan Area Planning and Development Commission (a.k.a. "Regional Commission") (O.C.G.A. § 50-8-80) for the 10-county Atlanta region, under state law, and the federally-designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) by the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1962, for the 20-county Atlanta region.

The results of the comparison between the ARC decision support tools and the INVEST PD criteria were unexpected. Instead of enhancing ARC’s existing tools with INVEST criteria, ARC ended up recommending a new tool that would evaluate sustainability as an independent analysis, but within a larger, modulated series of analyses. The reason for this is mostly attributed to the difference in how the criteria for INVEST PD is used versus how ARC prefers to use sustainability criteria. ARC is recommends “front loading” its planning process with a more robust sustainability analysis by using sustainability criteria to actually identify sustainable projects, as opposed to using criteria to evaluate projects once they have already been identified.

ARC’s Proposed Modulated Project Assessment Process



ARC determined that by placing an emphasis on sustainability at the beginning of the planning process, the criteria (underlying data) would be used to prioritize areas throughout the region where sustainable projects are most beneficial, and what types of sustainability components are most appropriate, depending on the existing environmental, social, or economic conditions of the corresponding location. Once there is a clearer idea of what types of transportation projects can be most sustainable, given the existing conditions, then the environmental screening process, can be evaluated with much more confidence and with enough guidance for local government sponsors to rely upon. While sustainability will not be the sole factor for identifying projects, conducting this up-front assessment will create opportunity for sponsors to consider sustainability components, such as those consistent with the INVEST PD criteria, as early as possible in the planning process. Applying the INVEST PD criteria from this perspective avoids the potential misappropriation of the criteria in circumstances where they may not be appropriate or context sensitive.

In addition to recommending identifying areas throughout the Atlanta region that are most appropriate for certain INVEST PD criteria, ARC also has expanded the purpose and functionality of the Project Environmental Screening Tool, the most prominent of the four tools, as it relates to environmental sustainability. The screening tool serves two functions:

1. To evaluate existing and future Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) projects (including TIP projects), relative to each other, based on the total footprint; and
2. To provide meaningful, actionable guidance to local project sponsors regarding any potential resource agency review, permitting, or decision-making, in anticipation of NEPA (linking planning with NEPA), through a fact sheet, or series of fact sheets, with an example provided below.

The INVEST PD module was an invaluable resource for providing direction on improving the tools that ARC uses to encourage sustainable project delivery. The full report outlines a series of recommendations and next steps for our use of the program as we continue to improve our process. A general overview of key lessons learned and recommended follow up steps is included here:

- Many of the INVEST PD criteria are appropriate for only certain project types/scores. Applying the criteria to all projects across the board could result in inconsistencies.
- Project type-related criteria are distinct project types that address distinct transportation improvement outcomes. Projects will rarely include multiple purposes, and therefore will not score well.
- Some of the INVEST PD criteria may not be suited to be addressed at the project level. Rather they are more systematic or comprehensive in nature and could be addressed from a different lens or perspective.
- Equity criteria needs to be included in the PD Module, or perhaps as an element of Education Outreach.
- Qualitative direction is of greater value to local planning stakeholders, than quantitative analysis.
- Certain INVEST PD criteria should be considered for inclusion into a programmatic agreement with GDOT and the FHWA-Georgia Division.
- Robust data stewardship will be critical to attaining the successful outcomes for sustainable project delivery.

ARC will continue working with federal, state, and local partners on integrating INVEST PD criteria into the planning process and data-driven, decision-support tools. The next steps will be to explore options to automate the sustainability analysis and carry out that process during the next Needs Assessment/Alternatives Analysis phases of the next long-range transportation plan (LRTP) update.