



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Transportation Planning Board  
**FROM:** Andrew Meese, TPB Systems Performance Planning Director  
**SUBJECT:** COG/TPB Activities to Compile COVID-19 Transportation Impacts Information  
**DATE:** October 15, 2020

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## INTRODUCTION

At the September 16, 2020 meeting, TPB members asked to be briefed on impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the region's transportation systems. This memorandum describes ongoing staff activities to compile and assess such information, summaries of which will be presented to the TPB and other stakeholders in future months.

## INFORMATION GATHERING AND ASSESSMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated precautions since March 2020 have had profound impacts on travel and transportation systems in the National Capital Region. The changes are due to simultaneous disruptions to the many factors that generate travel demand including – employment, economic activities, work arrangements, and personal and public health. Additionally, the responses to these disruptions from establishments, individuals and governments continue to evolve. Challenges in compiling and assessing these impacts include 1) the situation evolves quickly, often more quickly than our available data pipelines are providing data; 2) data sources are disparate and often geographically, temporally, and methodologically not consistent with one another; 3) understanding multi-disciplinary interactions of impacts may not be apparent when looking at any individual data set.

TPB staff currently is collaborating with COG's community, economic, and environmental staff planners to put together a multi-sectoral assessment of impacts, to be presented to the TPB and other stakeholders in future months. It is hoped that this effort will provide a clear, uniquely regional perspective on the situation, so as to inform long term planning and programming activities. This work will examine data availability on various aspects, consider the fidelity and limitations of the data, and examine if assessment is repeatable over time to help assess the long-term nature/extent of change.

This effort will also work towards a better understanding of what aspects the region needs to address to make our transportation system, among other sectors, more resilient and more equitable in the future. A meaningful analysis of this unprecedented change in the supply and demand on transportation needs accurate, representative, and comprehensive data on the demand and supply sides. For example, while the pandemic-related restrictions on movement have impacted travel demand, the personal and public health nature of the pandemic has affected the ability to provide transportation service – particularly public transportation. Regionally, fares contribute about 30% (ranging from 10% to 70% on different systems) of the operating costs of providing public

transportation. Inability to collect these fares (on systems that have suspended fare collection due to pandemic social distancing precautions) and reduced travel (particularly on the rail systems) have impacted the financial viability of public transportation. At the same time, transit agencies have had to consider rider and employee health risks and undertake both additional cleaning/disinfecting and equipment modification (e.g., driver shields) activities, while maintaining as much transit service as feasible. This comes at a time when these services have been most needed – especially the bus services.

Emergency orders in the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia impacting travel were issued in the general time period of March 5 through 20, 2020. The COG website at [www.mwcog.org/about-us/covid-19/](http://www.mwcog.org/about-us/covid-19/) provides information about declarations as well as links to data sources about COVID-19 and its (non-transportation) impacts.

## **PREVIEW OF INFORMATION**

Staff has been researching data and information from a variety of sources to examine the COVID-19 pandemic's transportation impacts from several perspectives. These data differ in geography, time scales, and methodologies because of the variety of mostly non-COG/TPB sources. Analysis, especially of the interrelationships among trends, is not complete. But a few general trends can be observed, consistent with what has been discussed in the media. These observations include:

- Many transportation indicators, such as traffic volumes and vehicle miles of travel (where these data are available), have shown that reductions in demand were most severe in the late March through April time frame, and have trended back toward (but generally remain under, to varying degrees) historical norms since then.
- Travel associated with commute trips appears to have been more significantly impacted than non-commute travel. Influencing factors likely include both increased telework and increased unemployment.
- Freight/truck travel never declined as much as passenger travel did.
- The complex interaction among transit ridership, service level changes, and reduced capacities on board buses and train cars (reflecting social distancing precautions) will need to be further analyzed.

## **OUTLOOK**

COG/TPB staff plans to work on this important issue expediently, but with enough time for appropriate consideration and analysis of the disparate data sources, to be able to understand and explain trends with sufficient confidence. We expect to be able to brief the TPB and other stakeholders in the coming months.