

MEMORANDUM

From: Matthew Johnson
To: John Swanson
CC: Darren Smith

Re: Financially Unconstrained Transportation Planning

3 July 2008

As per my assignment and as requested by the TPB Citizens Advisory Committee, I have contacted several Metropolitan Planning Organizations around the country to inquire about their long-range transportation planning practices. All of the agencies contacted use, to varying degrees, unconstrained planning as part of their process.

I have also contacted MPOs in five other regions and am waiting for responses to those inquiries.

MPOs Investigated:

- Atlanta Regional Commission
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (Philadelphia)
- Denver Regional Council of Governments
- Metropolitan Transportation Commission (San Francisco Bay Area)
- North Central Texas Council of Governments (Dallas-Fort Worth)
- Puget Sound Regional Council (Seattle)
- Sacramento Area Council of Governments
- San Diego Association of Governments
- Southern California Association of Governments (Los Angeles)

The properties of each of these MPOs' unconstrained plans were investigated and are reviewed here.

Cost Estimates

Of the Metropolitan Planning Organizations investigated, only two did not include cost estimates in their unconstrained plans. Many of the MPOs used ballpark figures to estimate costs, but some use more precise calculations. Cost estimates tended to reflect numbers based on conceptual design unless a project was already further along in engineering before being cut from the constrained list. The MPOs regarded the cost estimates as important because they could go to their boards, citizens, and legislators with firm, real numbers.

The two not using cost estimates were Philadelphia and Dallas-Fort Worth. Philadelphia excluded cost estimates because it was their first attempt at unconstrained planning. This attempt was made to get a handle on the needs of the region financially. The focus was more on visioning than creating an achievable plan, and as such, not all projects were

fully vetted. Future attempts will most likely include cost estimates and a more rigorous screening process for project selection.

In Dallas' case, cost estimates were not included because of the nature of their plan. In 2004, the Texas Department of Transportation asked all of the MPOs in the state to create a "needs-based" plan. This planning effort was aimed at better educating the legislature. Instead of making a project list, NCTCOG modeled the estimated number of lane miles required to eliminate all Level of Service (LOS) "F" facilities. So in Dallas' case, there is no "unconstrained list" just a dollar figure representing the number of lane miles of roadway needed.

Ranking Projects

The different MPOs were not as consistent on this field. Most do not rank projects, however. Of the three that do rank projects of the unconstrained list, the rankings are more reflective of policy prerogatives than an actual plan of attack. In San Francisco's case, projects with an emphasis on upkeep and maintenance are always ranked higher than projects involving new construction. San Diego often takes projects with lower rankings if other projects in the same corridor are under construction, in order to minimize the impact to drivers/transit users in the area.

Atlanta chose not to rank projects because of the fear that it would lead to nonproductive debates over projects and potentially damage the visioning process. Sacramento considered weighting projects unnecessary because if new funding became available, it would likely be applicable only to projects meeting certain criteria, regardless of rank.

Seattle, which currently does not rank projects, plans to do so starting with their 2010 update.

Produced as a Part of the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP)

All of the agencies interviewed produced the unconstrained portion of their plans as a part of the RTP except for North Central Texas COG. Dallas chose not to include the results of their unconstrained planning exercise because they wanted to avoid confusion between the two plans.

Updates

For the most part, the MPOs tend to update their unconstrained plans at the same time as their RTPs, every 4 years. Denver, however, updates its plan twice annually and Atlanta, so far, is on track to update the Aspirations Plan with every other RTP update.

Scenario Planning

Scenario planning seems to be an important part of completing an unconstrained plan. Almost all of the agencies I spoke with had done work on scenarios while developing their plans. While San Francisco was the only MPO that did not do scenario planning, the persons with whom I spoke at San Diego and Seattle were not sure how related their unconstrained lists were to their scenario planning exercises.

It seems that merely having an unconstrained list is almost enough to be considered a scenario, depending on how it's modeled. For most regions, scenario planning is a good tool to determine where the policy prerogatives in the region lie, and therefore is an essential aspect of developing an aspirations list.

Wish List

Other than Dallas-Fort Worth, all regions considered their unconstrained plans to be “wish lists” from their member jurisdictions. The MPOs selected projects based on their regional significance—either as submitted by the jurisdictions or by the MPO itself.

Denver's approach seemed to be a particularly good example of a wish list. Since all projects in both the constrained list and Metro Vision plans were modeled, it is easy to move projects in and out of the RTP. This makes their plan much more fluid and flexible to changes in funding. Essentially, all projects in Metro Vision (unconstrained) make up the larger set of projects from which the (constrained) RTP is drawn. Denver doesn't include every possible project in the region in their unconstrained plan, however. Instead, attention is paid to projects which are in regionally significant corridors. It is a wish list in the sense that jurisdictional leaders envision projects that will benefit the region as a whole.

Seattle, on the other hand, reported that all projects in local comprehensive plans were included, because the PSRC doesn't have the power to reject plans merely because they don't conform to the policy priorities for the region.

In Dallas' case, there is no “list.” Dallas' exercise was based heavily on modeling conceptual improvements, and they never developed a list of unfunded projects, merely an estimate of approximate cost.

How is the Unconstrained Plan Used?

MPO staff said their regions use their unconstrained plans as a tool to further their policy goals. This almost always takes the form of advocacy for additional funds. It is much easier to ask legislators for additional funds when one has concrete list of projects and projected costs. The MPO Staff at several regions also mentioned using the unconstrained list as a place where projects could stay on the radar or be “staged” until sufficient funding could be obtained.

Seattle put a strong emphasis on the unconstrained list as a way of maintaining/creating a regional dialogue about transportation issues around the Puget Sound. This idea of getting local officials to think outside their jurisdictional boundaries was reiterated by the person with whom I spoke at the Atlanta Regional Commission, who said that having an unconstrained plan helps create a vision and is a necessary first step.

Modeling

The MPOs were split on the issue of modeling their unconstrained plans as a whole. Those that did not model their entire project lists seemed not to do so in order to save time and money.

Conclusions

All of the staff interviewed at these agencies reported that having an unconstrained project list led to better planning except for the planner from San Francisco's MPO, who merely said he wasn't sure it made a difference. He did not speak negatively toward the unconstrained planning process, however. Philadelphia's representative reported that their process needed improvement, but that they were sticking with unconstrained planning. The planner I spoke with at SCAG reported that he wasn't sure if their planning process was better with an unconstrained list, but he was certain that it was necessary that they have one.

Regardless of agency, the planners with whom I spoke think very highly of the unconstrained plan as an element of the long-range transportation planning process. One planner at the Puget Sound Regional Council reported that the unconstrained project list is "a good way to make sure things aren't missing from the regional conversation," and that this method "informs the planning process."

Developing an unconstrained plan in our region would certainly be a difficult endeavor, especially with our three-state makeup. However, Philadelphia offers a good comparison. As a multi-state MPO, DVRPC just made their first attempt at an unconstrained plan, and although they were not as successful as they had hoped they would be, they are planning to move forward with an update to their unconstrained list with their next RTP update.

As a general note, the use of the term "unconstrained" to refer to these visioning processes can be misleading. It is the most commonly used and recognized term among the MPO staffers with whom I spoke, but none of the plans are truly *unconstrained*. A more appropriate term for this concept might be "*less constrained*." Of course, each of the MPOs uses their own criteria for determining how relaxed their constraints will be, but San Diego offers the best example.

The San Diego Association of Governments actually has three different plans. In addition to the constrained plan, and unconstrained plan, they have what is called the "Reasonably Expected Plan," which considers potential new revenue streams and the projects that could be included were these funding sources realized.

Essentially, there seem to be two ways of approaching unconstrained planning. The most common approach is referred to in this memorandum as wish list planning. With wish list planning, member jurisdictions submit projects of regional significance which the MPO chooses to include based on some set of predetermined policy criteria. A second approach which is also used among the MPOs interviewed is scenario-based planning. In scenario-based planning, the MPO looks at alternative futures, whether they be based on a certain type funding strategy, changing land uses, or the like. In this case, the MPO would determine an ideal scenario and the projects required to achieve that.