
COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE MONTHLY REPORT

July 15, 2021

Elisa Walton, CAC Chair

The TPB Community Advisory Committee (CAC) met virtually on July 15, 2021. The meeting included a discussion about project approvals for the region's long-range transportation plan, a briefing on a series of TPB focus groups conducted earlier in the year, and a discussion about the outline for the long-range plan.

Discussion about the Approval of Project Inputs for the Long-Range Plan Update

TPB staff director Kanti Srikanth provided a briefing on actions taken at the June meeting of the TPB. He provided some background about the federally required responsibilities of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) like the TPB, including requirements for air quality analysis. He said that at its meeting on June 16 the board voted to approve project inputs for the required air quality conformity analysis, which is an essential part of the long-range plan update.

As part of that action in June, Mr. Srikanth said, the board also voted against including an MDOT package of projects that included replacing the American Legion Bridge and HOT lanes on I-270 and I-495. He said that because of this action, the private funding that was assumed for this large package of projects – approximately \$6 billion -- might be in question. However, MDOT has indicated that the bridge still needs to be replaced and other highway repairs are required. Without the availability of private funding for the larger larger package of projects, the state needs to identify approximately \$1.5 billion for those necessary projects. Mr. Srikanth said a list of five projects had been identified for potential elimination from the long-range plan. He said that by eliminating those projects, MDOT would be able to fund the bridge replacement and other necessary improvements.

Mr. Srikanth explained that at the July board meeting, the TPB would first revisit their June vote on whether to include the full package of MDOT projects that the board rejected in June. If that measure fails, the board would convene a special meeting in August, on a proposal to eliminate the six projects mentioned above from the long-range plan.

During a group discussion, members made the following comments:

- ***Could the Wilson Bridge replacement be a model for the American Legion bridge project?*** A member suggested that the Wilson bridge replacement experience, which featured multi-state collaboration and federal leadership, could be a precedent for a cooperative funding arrangement for the American Legion Bridge.
- ***Concerns about public private partnerships.*** A member, speaking from experience in Virginia, noted that for state governments, there can be financial downsides with public private partnerships that sometimes are not immediately apparent in the rush to get a project moving, including restrictions on future road construction.

In order to maximize the opportunity for participation from all CAC members, the committee broke into four breakout groups to discuss the question: "What principles should the TPB follow in the process of approving the project inputs for the long-range transportation plan?"

After 10 minutes of small-group discussions, the following principles were identified by the different groups. They do not represent a consensus of the committee, and in some cases, they may actually be contradictory. These ideas are provided below as a reflection of various suggestions that community leaders have for the TPB:

- ***Only include projects in the long-range plan when they are ready.*** A number of committee members felt the Maryland 495/270 HOT lanes project was an example of a project that just was not ready for inclusion in the plan. They said the process seemed very rushed and politicized.
- ***Consistency is vital.*** Members said the process should not make it easier or harder for one project to be included in the long-range plan. Some said it was not fair that good projects, which have completed all necessary steps and are ready to move forward, might be put on hold because some projects are being treated differently.
- ***Clear public information is essential.*** Some members said that information about projects that were slated for inclusion in the plan has been very confusing. They said the public has found it difficult to understand various proposals when they were in the early stages of project development, and this confusion has continued with a confusing process and technical language.
- ***Take into account the diversity of the region.*** Members noted that the region includes different areas – urban, suburban, rural -- that have different kinds of needs which should be respected and accommodated in the long-range plan.
- ***Be open to new ideas.*** The regional planning process need to research and learn from success stories from around the country, as well as international examples.
- ***Don't reinvent the wheel; build on past planning work.*** Members suggested that the TPB should look more closely at studies from the past and make sure that the region is following up on previous planning work.
- ***The TPB is the place to consider the regional perspective.*** Regional considerations such as “mobility” (do projects help more people to get move efficiently?) and “equity” (do projects in the plan serve all communities?) should be core to the long-range plan development.
- ***Take regional aspirations, including the aspirational initiatives, seriously.*** Some members said the TPB should take its policy aspirations more seriously and not just defer to what the DOTs submit.
- ***Respect expert opinions.*** Other members said the DOTs should have greater weight in the decision-making process. They emphasized that the opinions of transportation professionals should be given more value in the long-range planning process.

Briefing on Focus Groups for the Visualize 2045 Update

Karen Armendariz of the TPB staff briefed the committee on a series of 11 focus groups that were conducted earlier this year as part of the public outreach activities for Visualize 2045. She said the focus groups were designed to provide background information and compelling human narratives to complement the findings of the public opinion survey that the TPB conducted last year. In particular,

she said, this qualitative research sought out the voices of underserved communities. She described how the focus groups focused on the three general topics – equity, safety, and climate change. She provided examples of quotes from focus group participants. She said the report from the focus groups would be released in August.

CAC members agreed that the findings from the focus groups were very compelling. Member comments and questions included the following:

- ***It's important to look at broad issues through the lens of personal experiences.*** A CAC member complimented staff for using the focus groups to better understand the needs of vulnerable communities on a topic like safety, including the specific concerns that people in underserved communities face when walking or bicycling.
- ***Skepticism about teleworking.*** A member observed that telework isn't going to work for everyone. People who are economically disadvantaged may not be able to work from home and therefore, perhaps the region should not be pushing telework so hard as a regional policy priority.
- ***Public outreach is needed earlier in the process.*** A member noted that the focus groups and other public outreach activity for the long range plan update are good but these activities happen quite late in the planning process. Members and staff discussed how public participation might be incorporated into earlier stages of the planning process. Staff did note that by the time projects reached the long range plan many decisions about them have already been made.

Briefing on an Outline for the Visualize 2045 Plan Document

Staff presented the outline for the new long-range plan document and presented a series of questions that it would like the CAC to answer. Staff will conduct an online poll of the committee to get answers to these questions:

- After learning about the plan outline and contents, is there anything that the TPB does that you think should be included or that you want emphasized?
- Can you please share any examples that you've seen that visualize complex information in easy to access ways?

In a brief discussion, one member made the comment that, overall, the COG website (not referring to the new Visualize 2045 website) is good but it is not current. He said that there is too much focus on meetings at COG and not enough information for the public.

Other items

- Lyn Erickson of TPB staff briefed the committee on the upcoming TPP agenda.
- An announcement was made that two staffers , Abigail Zenner and Karen Amendariz, will be leaving TPB staff.

Attendance

CAC Members

Elisa Walton, Chair
Nancy Abeles
Daniel Papiernik
Ashley Hutson
Katherine Kortum
Lyn Erickson
Emmet Tydings
Audrey Nwaze
Leonardo Pineda
Ra Amin
Jeff Jamawat
Rob Jackson
Michael Artson
Solomon Haile
Tracy Duvall

J. Kia James
Audrey Nwaze
Jeff Parnes
Bill Orleans
Tracy Duvall

Staff and Others

Bill Orleans, guest
Kanti Srikanth, COG/TPB Staff
Lyn Erickson, COG/TPB Staff
John Swanson, COG/TPB Staff
Stacy Cook, COG/TPB Staff
Karen Armendariz, COG/TPB Staff
Leo Pineda, COG/TPB Staff