

TPB Citizens Advisory Committee

RECOMMENDATIONS for Improving Information and Analysis of the Constrained Long-Range Plan (CLRP) and the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)

January 18, 2006

On January 12, 2006, the TPB's Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) approved the following recommendations on how to improve information and analysis for the TPB's key planning activities – the Constrained Long-Range Plan (CLRP) and the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The recommendations were developed in 2005 by a CAC working group chaired by Stephen Caflisch.

The CAC recommendations are summarized on pages 1-2. Detailed explanations of the recommendations are provided on the following pages.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Improve Public Information

Goal: CLRP/TIP information should be accurate, useful and user-friendly. Information on specific projects, as well as data on the overall plan, should be readily available.

Recommendations:

- Continue planned improvements:
 - Improve public comment postings on the web.
 - Develop a web-based CLRP homepage.
 - Implement an online project database.
- Provide better project information, such as concise project cost information.
- Make public comments more useful to decision makers.
- Conduct a survey of newsletter readers.

2. Provide More Analysis, Earlier in the Process

Goal: In order to have meaningful impact, analysis must be made available earlier and must be more user-friendly.

Recommendations:

- Continue planned improvements:
 - Provide more user-friendly analysis like the recent brochure containing analysis of the current CLRP.

- Seek input from the CAC and citizens to determine what types of system performance information would be most useful for public discussion.
- Develop more effective methods for presenting analysis.
- Make specific enhancements/additions to CLRP analysis:
 - Focus analysis on activity centers instead of activity clusters.
 - Consider analyses to supplement or replace the accessibility to jobs analysis.
 - Clearly present information on land use inputs and their interaction with travel demand modeling.

3. Consider Changes in the Planning Process

Goal: In order to optimize the improvements recommended above, and to provide a fuller context in which the public can understand transportation decision making, the TPB should consider fundamental changes in the planning process.

Recommendations:

- The TPB should:
 - Lengthen the CLRP/TIP development cycle *or* identify another way to permit more time to integrate analysis and strategic thinking into the development of the CLRP and the TIP.
 - Ask the implementing agencies to clearly explain in public forums how the projects for the CLRP are chosen—either by holding special annual meetings at the subregional (Northern Virginia, Suburban Maryland and D.C.) level or by enhancing existing subregional meetings/events.
 - Develop a list or plan of unfunded regional transportation priorities. The development of this plan could start with the projects that have been identified for study in the TPB’s Regional Mobility and Accessibility Study.

RECOMMENDATIONS IN DETAIL

1. IMPROVE PUBLIC INFORMATION

The working group believes that CLRP/TIP information should be accurate, useful and user-friendly. Information on specific projects should be readily available, as well as data on the overall plan.

In recent years, staff has made significant improvements in the CLRP documentation and in CLRP information on the website. These enhancements include the brochure and CD that were produced for the 2003 CLRP.

In response to a CAC recommendation in 2004, staff implemented a website-based public comment system that allows citizens to enter their comments directly into the website. These comments are indexed, allowing other people to read the comments and sort them according to name, organization, jurisdiction, and position on key issues (pro/con/other).

Planned improvements:

Partly in response to continued CAC interest, TPB staff is currently planning a number of new, broad improvements in CLRP/TIP information. These changes include:

- ***Transition to a “living” document.*** A new web-based CLRP will become a living document instead of the 3-year snapshot that has characterized plan documentation in the past. This living document will be updated on an ongoing basis as the CLRP is amended and as new analysis becomes available.
- ***Make available an online project database.*** As part of the living CLRP document, staff is developing an online project database that will be available to the public. Users will be able to sort the database according to a number of different categories. Projects will be linked to an interactive map.

CAC recommendations:

- ***Continue information improvements.*** The CAC supports the staff’s efforts at CLRP/TIP information improvement. The committee asks to be provided the opportunity to comment upon new improvements as they become available.
- ***Provide new information.*** The CAC makes the following recommendations for staff to consider in the development of new CLRP/TIP documentation:
 - ***Develop a concise table with major projects.*** The CLRP’s Major Projects List should be transformed into a table that would include (in addition to

the information currently available) information on project costs and county/jurisdiction where projects are located.

- ***Clarify the project descriptions.*** The project descriptions featured as pdfs on the website are confusing. These descriptions should be streamlined and clarified.
- ***Add some useful information*** to the project descriptions:
 - Links to DOT/local websites that contain more extensive project information;
 - Breakdown of cost information by total costs and remaining costs;
 - Indication of whether projects have been previously listed in the TIP, but not funded. Each TIP project entry should include (or be linked to) a permanent history file that lists any funding for this project in prior TIPs.
 - A system for linking and aggregating closely related projects, such as highway capacity projects along Route 1 in Virginia..
 - Both "short" and "long" project descriptions for each project. Often the short project descriptions are too vague to support meaningful analysis.
- ***Make public comments more useful to decision makers.*** The CAC supports the website improvements in 2004 that permit citizens and decision-makers to view public comments on the web, and sort them according to various categories. The CAC would like to see continued efforts to make public comments readily available for decision makers to read and use in their deliberations. We also urge that public comments remain available on the web site after the TPB makes its decision on an issue. Often the same issue will arise later in a somewhat different form (as with decisions to include projects in the CLRP for testing and later when the CLRP is approved), and continuing access to the comments would be valuable.

The CAC asks staff to reevaluate the format, content and timing of the document that is distributed to the TPB which contains a summary of comments and responses to comments. Members of the CAC have expressed concerns about the ways in which some comments have been characterized and addressed in the past. We believe staff should be very careful to characterize comments accurately, give complete information in response, avoid giving selective information that favors the position of the DOTs, and take a broad view instead of a narrow technical view of the TPB's responsibility in dealing with the CLRP. Further, because the summary and responses normally are provided very shortly before the TPB meeting at which action is to be taken, concerned citizens often have no effective recourse if they believe their comments have been mischaracterized or dismissed on narrow technical grounds that presume a very narrow role for the TPB. Earlier distribution could at least provide citizens an opportunity before the TPB meeting to notify an interested TPB member of their concerns.

- **Conduct a survey on the TPB newsletter.** The CAC also recommends the TPB staff conduct a survey of readers of the *TPB News* to determine how the newsletter and other TPB publications might be made more useful as vehicles for conveying information about the CLRP/TIP and the TPB process in general.

2. PROVIDE MORE ANALYSIS, EARLIER IN THE PROCESS

The CAC believes that analysis of the CLRP should become more integrated into the transportation decision-making process. However, the group recognizes that if plan analysis is going to have a real impact, it must be made available earlier and must be more user-friendly.

Current process for providing analysis

Typically, the schedule for performing the TPB's air quality conformity analysis has driven the CLRP approval schedule: The CLRP's final approval has usually been timed to coincide with the approval of the air quality conformity determination.

Because air quality conformity is performed under a very tight timeframe and is very staff intensive, most other analysis is typically performed only *after* CLRP amendments or updates are approved. For example, the CLRP Accessibility Analysis, which measures how the plan changes accessibility to jobs, has been performed after the plan is amended or updated – typically every year. Other analysis is performed every three years for inclusion in the comprehensive CLRP update document.

Planned improvements:

Partly in response to CAC concerns, TPB staff is making improvements to provide more extensive, user-friendly analysis earlier in the plan's development process.

These improvements include:

- **A new brochure containing analysis of the current CLRP.** This brochure is intended to provide information about the performance of the currently adopted plan as a context for future plan updates. The brochure contains analysis on metropolitan growth, travel growth and congestion, activity cluster analysis, and accessibility to jobs analysis.
- **A lengthening of the CLRP development schedule by two months** to permit TPB staff more time to conduct analysis. The 2006 plan will be released one month earlier and will be approved one month later than in recent years.

CAC recommendations:

- ***Continue and expand efforts to highlight more analysis early in the CLRP development process.*** The CAC supports the staff's efforts to make more analysis available earlier. In particular, the CAC notes that some features of the recent CLRP brochure could be developed at an earlier stage in the CLRP development process because they do not need to wait for modeling to be completed. For example, the TPB staff analysis of activity centers/clusters does not require travel demand modeling.
- ***Seek input from the CAC and the public.*** The CAC asks to be provided with the opportunity to comment upon new improvements as they become available. Staff should seek input from citizens and the CAC not necessarily on the technical aspects of the analysis that should be performed, but on the type of system performance indicators will be most useful for public discussion.
- ***Develop more effective methods for presenting analysis.*** In preparing analysis, staff should explore new ways for presenting performance data that will be concise and easy to understand.
- ***Make specific enhancements/additions to CLRP analysis:***
 - ***Focus analyses on activity centers instead of activity clusters.*** Under the guidance established by the TPB Vision, activity centers are intended to be focal points for future job and household growth, and nodes for transportation linkages. The CAC is pleased that TPB staff has recently conducted an analysis to determine how these places will be affected by the CLRP. However, the committee is concerned that this analysis used "activity clusters" instead of "activity centers." Because the clusters are larger than the centers, the CAC is concerned that the analysis may be overly optimistic. Using the activity centers in the analysis would be more consistent with the TPB Vision and with prior CAC recommendations.
 - ***Consider analyses to supplement or replace the Accessibility to Jobs Analysis.*** The Accessibility to Jobs Analysis can be useful but also can be easily misinterpreted, particularly as it interacts with land use. For example, increasing projected jobs faster than projected households "improves" this measure, since the average household considered in the analysis will be closer to more jobs. But the analysis ignores the increasing percentage of all commuters who would have to commute long distances to fill the jobs. Further, to the extent the Accessibility to Jobs Analysis counts jobs that the model eventually disregards, it is quite misleading, particularly in analyzing land use proposals or projects that involve increasing jobs faster than households.

- ***Clearly present land use inputs and issues related to their interaction with the travel demand model.*** Inputs to the TPB's travel forecasting models should be more clearly explained to the public. For example, CAC members have expressed two specific concerns regarding the manner in which the region's jobs/housing imbalance has been addressed in the model: First, decision-makers and the public should understand that TPB jurisdictions assume greater employment growth than can be supported by planned household growth; the shortfall is made up by commuters from other jurisdictions, often outlying jurisdictions not represented on the TPB. Second, decision-makers and the public should understand that when the jobs assumed in the modeled area exceed the employees available from households in the modeled area plus in-commuters assumed from outside the modeled area, the travel demand model reduces jobs in the modeled area until the totals balance. The amount of the reduction, where it comes from, and the resulting actual employment totals should be presented. The failure to provide this information distorts analysis and misleads decision-makers and the public.

For example, the alternate land use approved for analysis of the CLRP with the ICC assumed tens of thousands of new jobs in and near the ICC corridor, no new households, and no reduction in jobs elsewhere. Representative from other jurisdictions were assured the ICC would not take jobs from those jurisdictions, yet to balance workers with jobs, the model assumed jobs in all other modeled areas would be reduced. This was done without reporting or accountability. Note that this comment assumes the basic assumption in the model is correct, namely that changes in the rate of increase in employment (or in imbalances between jobs and households) in the modeled area do not affect the number of commuters from outside the modeled area. More serious issues than disclosure arise if the assumption is incorrect.

3. MAKE CHANGES IN THE PLANNING PROCESS TO PERMIT CONSIDERATION OF MORE INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS

The CAC is fundamentally interested in a planning process that is open and deliberative. In order to optimize the improvements recommended above, and to provide a fuller context in which the public can understand regional transportation decision making, the CAC believes the TPB should consider whether fundamental changes should be made in the planning process.

CAC recommendations:

- ***The TPB should further lengthen the CLRP/TIP development cycle or identify another way to permit more time to integrate analysis and strategic thinking into***

- ***the development of the CLRP and the TIP.***

The TPB, de facto, produces a new plan every year. Although the triennial update is more comprehensive because it includes a financial analysis, the CLRP essentially undergoes the same cycle every year: Solicitation Document released at the beginning of the year; project submissions in early spring; air quality conformity analysis in spring/summer; and final approval in the fall. Under this annual cycle, the approval of the new CLRP typically occurs at the end of the year—just one or two months before the next year’s CLRP cycle begins.

In previous years, there has been little time to conduct much analysis of the plan until after the TPB approves it. The tightness of the schedule makes it difficult for decision-makers or the public to learn about the CLRP amendments and to reflect upon the plan’s impacts.

The CAC appreciates that the 2006 CLRP development cycle has already been lengthened by two months. However, the committee believes the TPB should further extend the CLRP/TIP cycle to permit the development of more analysis and the release of more public information. Alternatively, the committee would ask the TPB to identify another way to permit more time to integrate analysis and strategic thinking into the development of the CLRP and the TIP, including analysis of alternatives and mitigation strategies.

- ***The TPB should ask the implementing agencies to clearly explain in public forums how the projects for the CLRP are chosen—either by holding special annual meetings at the subregional (Northern Virginia, Suburban Maryland and D.C.) level or by enhancing existing subregional meetings/events.***

The selection of projects for inclusion in the CLRP and TIP is an indication of the regional priorities of the implementing agencies. Currently, the implementing agencies hold public meetings on specific projects as they proceed through planning and development, but they do not publicly explain how their annual project submissions are justified in a regional context. Some public involvement opportunities—such as the “Annual Tour” in Maryland or the annual public hearings on Virginia’s Six-Year Transportation Improvement Program—typically address short-term project selection, not long-term prioritization for the CLRP. When long-range project prioritization does occur at the state or subregional level—such as the development of the TransAction 2030 Plan in Northern Virginia—it is often not clear how those planning efforts are integrated into the project selection process for the CLRP.

The CAC believes the TPB should ask the major implementing agencies—the state DOTs and WMATA—to clearly explain in public forums how the projects for the CLRP are chosen. This public explanation could be accomplished either by holding special annual meetings at the subregional level or by enhancing existing state or

subregional meetings/events, such as the Maryland “Annual Tour,” to explicitly include information on how projects have prioritized and selected for inclusion in the CLRP and TIP.

- ***The TPB should develop a list or plan of unfunded regional transportation priorities.***

The TPB has extensively discussed the region’s unfunded needs in aggregate, but there is no regional plan that specifies unfunded priority projects. Therefore, it is difficult to put the constrained plan into context within the region’s broader needs or to know which projects the region believes should be funded if more money would become available.

The CAC recommends the TPB develop a list or plan of unfunded priority projects, which would provide a “big-picture” context for understanding project selection for the CLRP. The development of this plan could start with the projects that have been identified for study in the TPB’s Regional Mobility and Accessibility Study.

Approved by the TPB Citizens Advisory Committee
By unanimous vote, January 12, 2006