

# **“ARE WE ACHIEVING OUR REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION GOALS?”**

## **Draft Report On Listening Sessions With the Staff of the COG/TPB Member Jurisdictions**

**November 13, 2014**

### **I. OVERVIEW**

Between June and October of 2014, TPB and COG staff conducted a series of ten listening sessions with approximately 90 local staff members of the TPB’s member jurisdictions to discuss the Regional Transportation Priorities Plan (RTPP) and COG’s Place+ Opportunity report. This report summarizes the key themes that staff heard in those sessions.

### **II. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE**

The TPB approved the RTPP in January 2014. In February, the board asked staff to develop an assessment comparing the 2014 Constrained Long-Range Plan, still in draft form, and the RTPP. The “Priorities Plan Assessment of the 2014 CLRP,” which was released to the TPB in two parts—an initial qualitative assessment in April and the final assessment report in September—provided an overview of how staff understands the 2014 CLRP supports the goals and priorities identified in the RTPP.

In preparing that assessment, however, it became clear that many implementation activities necessary to achieve the goals of the RTPP typically occur at the local level and will not be reflected in the projects and analysis of the CLRP. The RTPP Listening Sessions were conceived as a means to better understand activities of the TPB member jurisdictions that advance our common regional goals, and to identify opportunities to promote implementation of the various strategies identified in the RTPP. Through the listening sessions, the TPB staff met with the professional staffs of the local jurisdictions and sought out their opinions and experiences with regard to achieving our regional transportation goals.

The listening sessions were designed to: 1) gather information on whether and how jurisdiction staffs believe we are achieving regional goals, and 2) expand awareness of the *RTPP* among the TPB’s member jurisdictions.

The sessions specially sought to illuminate the connections between the *RTPP*’s policy framework and the planning and decision-making activities conducted by the TPB’s members. The sessions also included discussion about the importance of regional Activity Centers, which were highlighted in both the RTPP and the recently approved *Place + Opportunity* report. COG staff developed the *Place + Opportunity* report as a resource to strengthen and enhance Activity Centers throughout metropolitan Washington.

### III. WHO PARTICIPATED

TPB and COG staff conducted 10 sessions in which more than 90 local staff members of the TPB's member jurisdictions participated. Each group brought together a mix of professional staffers, including many who do not typically participate in TPB activities and may not be familiar with the RTPP. In addition to transportation planners, all the meetings included staff working on land-use and community planning and transportation management and operations.

Separate listening sessions were not conducted for those Maryland municipalities and Virginia cities (except Alexandria) that are members of the TPB. However, staff from those jurisdictions were invited to participate in sessions hosted by county staff.

The following sessions were conducted:

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|--|------------|
| • Frederick County/City  | June 25    |
| • Montgomery County (Gaithersburg, Rockville, Takoma Park invited) | June 25    |
| • Alexandria   | June 30    |
| • District of Columbia   | June 30    |
| • Prince George's County (Bowie, College Park, Greenbelt invited)  | July 1     |
| • Charles County   | July 2     |
| • Loudoun County   | July 9     |
| • Arlington County   | July 15    |
| • Prince William County (Manassas and Manassas Park invited)       | July 17    |
| • Fairfax County (City of Fairfax and Falls Church invited)        | October 17 |

The team of TPB and COG staffers who made presentations and facilitated discussions at the sessions included Benjamin Hampton, Sophie Mintier, Dan Sonenklar, and John Swanson. Afterwards, those individuals jointly identified the themes that are documented in this report.

### IV. HOW WE CONDUCTED THE SESSIONS

The sessions were conducted as two-hour, facilitated focus groups. Each session began with a brief staff presentation on the RTPP and on the Place + Opportunity report.

The six goals of the RTPP formed the basis for discussion:

1. Provide a Comprehensive Range of Transportation Options
2. Promote a Strong Regional Economy, Including a Healthy Regional Core and Dynamic Activity Centers
3. Ensure Adequate System Maintenance, Preservation, and Safety
4. Maximize Operational Effectiveness and Safety of the Transportation System
5. Enhance Environmental Quality, and Protect Natural and Cultural Resources
6. Support Inter-Regional and International Travel and Commerce

The listening sessions focused on Goals 1-3, although the remaining goals (4-6) were discussed briefly towards the end of each session. To a large degree, the first three goals encompass a range of topics that in many ways include objectives more explicitly called out in the last three goals. For example, the

RTPP's focus on Activity Centers (Goal 2) promotes environmental objectives, which are the focus of Goal 5.

For each of the first three goals, staff provided a short briefing on "what we know" related to the goal, including information on projects in the CLRP and TIP, and forecasts from the 2014 CLRP performance analysis. It should be noted that each session began with Goal 3 – "Maintenance" – because it is actually the top priority in the RTPP. The discussion then proceeded to Goals 1 and 2. However, this report, in the themes described below, follows the numerical ordering of the goals.

Before talking about each goal, staff used internet polling software ([www.polleverywhere.com](http://www.polleverywhere.com)) to ask a series of questions about the degree to which participants believe the region or their jurisdiction is achieving key objectives in the RTPP. With this polling software, participants were able to use their cellphones to answer a total of nine questions. TPB and COG staff emphasized that the polling was not being used for data gathering, but rather was intended to be a fun way to galvanize conversation, quickly get everyone involved, and establish a baseline for further probing in the discussion.

At the conclusion of each session, participants were asked for suggestions on follow-up activities that the TPB and COG can conduct to promote the goals of the Priorities Plan.

## V. **WHAT WE HEARD**

TPB and COG staff have identified the key themes, which are described below, from the 10 listening sessions with local staff. In all cases, these were opinions, ideas and concerns that were discussed in more than one session with more than one jurisdiction.

### **Goal 1: OPTIONS**

Provide a Comprehensive Range of Transportation Options

#### ***Regional Background Information:***

Staff provided information from the CLRP regarding anticipated regional system performance, revenues/expenditures, and projects in the CLRP. In presenting this information, staff explained: "Here is what we know, from a regional perspective. Now we want to hear what you think, from both a professional and personal perspective."

Five key questions were used to frame the discussion. These questions focused on specific types of transportation options.

#### **1. Sufficient Transit Options**

##### ***Discussion question:***

- *In 25 years, there will be sufficient transit options in our region. [Agree? Disagree?]*

**Discussion themes:**

- ***New projects are generating optimism and excitement.*** Participants generally agreed that in 25 years, the region will have a wider variety of transit options to meet different needs. A number of participants noted that in the near future, with the arrival of projects like the Silver Line, Purple Line and streetcars/light rail, the public will have first-hand experiences with new kinds of transit. Positive public opinions of those new services will create support for additional increases in transit capacity. Others said that in the near future, the region will see dramatic new examples of how transit can catalyze transit-oriented development. Projects like Tysons, for example, will provide a transformative model for the rest of the region and the nation at large.
- ***Local bus systems are effectively meeting local needs.*** Participants expressed confidence in local bus services. Many of them also called attention to the important role of commuter bus systems, and called for enhancements in such services. Some participants indicated that local bus services are focused on meeting the needs of low-income individuals more than being an option for “choice” riders. That is, local governments have been successful in funding and implementing systems, and providing greater service, but they are not necessarily coaxing people out of cars.
- ***Lots of good plans, but doubts about implementation.*** Participants expressed concern about the length of time needed to complete large transportation projects. Noting that major projects take decades, some participants questioned whether the right steps were being taken now to make sure the “next big thing” is built 20 years from now. Participants also spoke about the underlying challenge of prioritization: Do we focus on one big project or should we try to move forward with lots of priorities?
- ***Concerns about lack of funding and leadership.*** Participants expressed frustration about the ongoing lack of funding for transportation and the implications that had for planning major new transit facilities or expanding service levels on existing facilities. Some described difficulty in realizing plans for more transit-supportive development patterns, citing insufficient market demand and the political challenges of making tough decisions.
- ***Some major regional gaps, particularly in the suburbs.*** While transit coverage in the core was acknowledged to be extensive, some participants spoke of the need for transit to reach into outer suburban locations and to connect suburbs through circumferential services. However, some participants said it was important to honestly acknowledge that we cannot provide transit in all corners of the region, particularly in low-density locations.
- ***Good land-use designs are essential for making non-road options viable.*** Almost invariably, conversations about transit options included discussion of land use, including the need to focus on mixed uses and walkability.
- ***Concern that transit systems will not be sufficiently connected across jurisdictions.*** In a number of jurisdictions, participants expressed concern that systems planning was not happening at the

regional level. While expressing optimism about local innovative services, they feared these enhancements could result in patchwork systems that will be difficult to navigate and use.

## 2. Sufficient Options for Drivers

### *Discussion question:*

- *In 25 years, there will be sufficient options in our region for drivers. [Agree? Disagree?]*

### *Discussion themes:*

- **General acknowledgement that we won't be adding a lot of new roads in the next 25 years.** Participants generally accepted that adding new road capacity is increasingly hard and we are unlikely to do much of it in the coming decades. Some participants generally supported this reality, noting that we already have a ubiquitous, extensive road system. Others said that new capacity is still needed, but it is unlikely to happen because of costs and other political realities.
- **Some key road connections are still needed.** In particular, staffers in the outer jurisdictions emphasized that their road networks have key missing gaps. They noted that their plans call for completion of these road improvements, which are local priorities. Many of these same participants said that many communities lack alternative routes and so traffic is funneled onto already congested roads. They stressed the importance of relieving bottlenecks and they also spoke about the need for more connectivity and street grids.
- **Significantly reducing congestion is not likely.** There was general acceptance that congestion overall is not likely to get much better, even with capacity enhancements. Participants noted that even plans that call for extensive new capacity (e.g., Northern Virginia's TransAction 2040) forecast continuing high levels of congestion on many roads.
- **Balancing supply and demand.** Participants said that decision makers and planners are constantly seeking to determine the right line between accommodating and discouraging driving. When considering new road capacity, they said, it is often tricky to achieve the right balance.
- **Demand reduction is key.** A number of participants noted that "options for drivers" should also mean non-driving alternatives. We need to moderate demand for driving by providing other transportation options and through better land use, they said.
- **There's little appetite for tolling.** As part of the wider topic of demand reduction, many participants acknowledged that road pricing would be highly effective. Yet, when pressed on this topic, most participants did not foresee a significantly larger role for tolling in our region. They cited the political challenges of adding new capacity, even if it is tolled. And they indicated that it was even less likely that we would toll existing capacity. (Participants at the session in D.C. expressed a different position on this last point, indicating that tolling existing roads was part of their new long-range plan, "moveDC.")

### 3. Sufficient Options for Pedestrians & Bicyclists

**Discussion question:**

- *In 25 years, there will be sufficient options in our region for pedestrians and bicyclists. [Agree? Disagree?]*

**Discussion themes:**

- ***“Just look at the progress we’ve made.”*** Participants widely said that over the last decade there has been a cultural shift in the general public toward acceptance of walking and bicycling. Planning professionals and decision makers have both led and followed this change in attitude. Increasingly, the way we design roads and build communities embodies a “complete streets” sensibility, most participants said.
- ***In many cases we’ve taken care of the low-hanging fruit.*** Participants observed that many improvements in recent years have been uncontroversial and relatively inexpensive, but that won’t always be the case. For example, retrofitting roads often requires giving up capacity for vehicles – which can be hard to justify given the relatively low ped/bike mode shares that are typically forecast. In suburban locations, critical last-mile gaps are a continuing challenge in getting commuters from transit to jobs. And in many jurisdictions, participants expressed concern about the insufficiency of funding for ped/bike improvements, even though they are usually much less expensive than other modes.
- ***Significant differences between inner and outer jurisdictions.*** Participants noted that in outer suburban areas, the challenges for ped/bike planning primarily relate to land use. These places still do not have enough clustered destinations to make biking and walking a viable transportation option. In contrast, inner jurisdictions increasingly have sufficient destinations within proximity, but they need more infrastructure and funding for ped/bike improvements. In discussing outer suburban locations, participants noted that walking and bicycling infrastructure is still often viewed primarily as recreational.

### 4. Maximizing Use of the Existing Transit System.

**Discussion question:**

- ***The region is making adequate progress in maximizing use of the existing transit system. [Agree? Disagree?]***

**Discussion themes:**

- ***Small fixes can go a long way.*** Participants spoke with enthusiasm about small steps they have taken to improve local transit services, and they agreed that more is needed. They said that all levels of transit services should be seeking new efficiencies -- things like reconfiguring seats, and improving bus stops and signage. A number of participants noted that we need to more fully employ bus priority treatments.

- ***We need to tap underutilized transit capacity.*** Participants noted that Metro stations on the eastern side of the region have lots of capacity for ridership and development. Others spoke about the opportunities for reverse commuting on both Metrorail and commuter rail. They emphasized the challenges of promoting job growth near underutilized rail stations. But they also spoke about the difficulties of designing communities that are not auto-oriented around transit stations.
- ***Transit capacity in the core is deficient.*** Participants acknowledged the Metro system's inability to keep up with growing demands in the core. They said that eight-car trains and core station improvements are essential. And in some cases, they expressed alarm that the region's transit was being expanded (particularly the Silver Line), but core capacity improvements were not yet funded.
- ***Lack of enthusiasm for WMATA's Metro 2025 package (Momentum).*** As part of an introductory briefing, TPB staff did indicate that Metro 2025 was not funded in the 2014 CLRP. In the following discussions, however, participants rarely cited this lack of funding as a pressing concern. When directly asked about it, they often expressed general support for the improvements, although some raised concerns about specific aspects of the \$6-billion package. In general, their responses indicated a sense that this was not a problem they were involved in addressing or responsible for. In some cases, participants assumed that core capacity needs will eventually get taken care of.

## 5. Accessibility for Disadvantaged Populations

### ***Discussion question:***

- *The region is making adequate progress in ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities, low incomes and limited English proficiency. [Agree? Disagree?]*

### ***Discussion themes:***

- ***Steady progress for people with disabilities.*** Largely due to ADA, participants noted, the region and the country overall have seen major progress in ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities.
- ***But full accessibility for people with disabilities is expensive and takes a long time.*** Participants noted that ADA is essentially an unfunded mandate, so funding remains a challenge. In addition, many improvements will simply take a while. One participant noted, for example, that utility poles on sidewalks cannot be relocated overnight. (Note: The cost of running MetroAccess was rarely cited by participants as an issue of major concern.)
- ***Affordable housing is the top concern regarding low-income access.*** In most discussions, participants expressed concern about the increasing lack of affordable housing near transit and in Activity Centers.
- ***But the cost and limited coverage of transit is also a problem.*** Many participants noted that transit fares are increasingly unaffordable for low-income people. They further commented that

transit services are not adequate for those who do not commute during the peak or need to travel in reverse commute directions.

## **Goal 2: ACTIVITY CENTERS**

Promote a Strong Regional Economy, Including a Healthy Regional Core and Dynamic Activity Centers

### ***Regional Background Information:***

As background, staff presented the Activity Centers map and list, and provided data from regional forecasts for 2040. These data included the increased percentage of anticipated growth in Activity Centers and the increased number of Activity Centers that will be connected by high-capacity transit.

Three key questions were used to frame the discussion. These questions focused on *concentration* of future development in Activity Centers, improving *circulation* within Activity Centers, and providing better *connections* between Activity Centers.

### **1. Concentration within Activity Centers**

#### ***Discussion question:***

- *In 25 years, the Activity Centers in my jurisdiction will be high-quality places in which to live and work. [Agree? Disagree?]*

#### ***Discussion themes:***

- ***Broad acceptance of the concept of concentrated, mixed-use centers.*** Throughout the region, participants noted that decision makers, stakeholders and citizens have broadly endorsed the concept of Activity Centers that are mixed-use, concentrated, and walkable. They cited numerous examples of centers that are already built or are underway.
- ***But true mixed-use development is hard.*** Participants noted that the market doesn't always "follow the plan" and that political leadership is sometimes lacking. Attracting jobs is especially important, but often difficult.
- ***Activity Centers are increasingly unaffordable.*** Successful Activity Centers are often some of the most unaffordable locations in which to live. Some participants cited this as the most resonant public criticism of the idea of concentrated development.

### **2. Circulation with Activity Centers**

#### ***Discussion question:***

- *In 25 years, it will be possible to conveniently travel within the Activity Centers in my jurisdiction without a car. [Agree? Disagree?]*



**Discussion themes:**

- **Big attitude change in recent years.** Participants spoke proudly about their accomplishments in promoting non-motorized transportation within Activity Centers. They described a virtuous circle of creating new supplies of ped/bike infrastructure, which in turn creates new demand for non-motorized transportation facilities. Participants noted that recent experiences have shown that circulation improvements are possible everywhere, including in Activity Centers in outer jurisdictions.
- **Lack of good design is a continuing challenge.** Participants noted that density is not enough. In many locations, roads are still very focused on car travel and they are very hard to retrofit. Further, participants said that a lack of redundancy in routes and services is a continuing challenge.

### 3. Connections between Activity Centers

**Discussion question:**

- *In 25 years, the Activity Centers in my jurisdiction will be sufficiently connected to the rest of the region with a variety of transportation modes. [Agree? Disagree?]*

**Discussion themes:**

- **New and existing transit is making good use of Activity Centers.** Participants indicated general satisfaction that Activity Centers are increasingly connected by transit. In particular, new projects such as the Silver Line and the Purple Line are efficiently connecting corridors between Activity Centers, making multi-modal travel increasingly viable.
- **Attracting jobs is key.** Again, many participants said the fundamental challenge comes back to land use. Creating good places depends, in part, on having strong connections to other places. And developing strong connections depends on having strong employment.
- **Last-mile connections continue to be a challenge.** Even where transit connections exist, they may not be viable for commuting because jobs are not accessible on foot from the destination station – or they do not feel accessible.
- **More regional systems planning is needed.** Participants expressed concern about a lack of comprehensive, regional planning to identify opportunities and gaps among transit and other cross-jurisdictional projects. In a number of sessions, participants expressed particular interest in exploring options for circumferential corridors and for promoting reverse commuting.

### **Goal 3: MAINTENANCE**

Ensure Adequate Systems Maintenance, Preservation, and Safety

#### ***Regional Background Information:***

Staff provided information about maintenance from a regional perspective, emphasizing that the Priorities Plan identified maintenance as the region's number-one priority. TPB staff said that the 2014 CLRP provides full funding for maintenance, operations, and state of good repair for roads and transit. To a large degree, this good news was the result of recent revenue increases in Virginia and Maryland.

#### ***Discussion questions:***

- *Rate how you think the region is doing in maintaining our roads. [5-1: Excellent to Poor]*
- *Rate how you think the region is doing in maintaining our transit systems. [5-1: Excellent to Poor]*

#### ***Discussion themes:***

- ***Compared to other places, we're actually doing pretty well in this region.*** Many participants commented on poor conditions in other states and regions. They acknowledged that here at home, maintenance could be a lot worse.
- ***There's a perception that roads are better maintained than transit.*** Participants throughout the region, even in places not served by Metro, described negative public perceptions about Metro maintenance. In general, the participants (who were largely employees of local government) said they considered local transit to be better maintained than regional transit. Most participants acknowledged that Metro has made recent progress, but it will take a while to turn around negative public perceptions. Years of deferred maintenance on Metro have created a stigma.
- ***New money at the state level is helping to get transportation to a state of good repair.*** Participants said the recent revenue increases in Maryland and Virginia will make a big difference. Many of them said that they would have answered this question differently only a year ago.
- ***Although there's new money at the state level, funding for local roads has been squeezed.*** Participants generally expressed concern that local roads often get ignored. This was probably the point most frequently mentioned regarding road maintenance. For example, in Maryland's outer jurisdictions, participants called attention to the reductions in the Highway User Revenue Program.
- ***There's a general concern that funding will continue to be unreliable.*** Participants noted that funding is still beholden to annual budget cycles. Moreover, transportation needs still outpace funding, and participants were concerned that large capital projects could absorb most of the new revenues.

## Goals 4-6

To conclude the listening sessions, staff presented the final three goals of the Priorities Plan and asked participants to comment on regional successes and where they saw the biggest gaps between what the goals call for and what we realistically can expect to see over the next 25 years.

This part of the discussion was much shorter than the earlier goals and participants were not asked polling questions. However, some recurring themes emerged from these discussions, which are described below.

### **Goal 4: Maximize Operation Effective and Safety of the Transportation System**

- ***Self-optimizing systems will offer big opportunities.*** In a number of sessions, participants spoke about autonomous vehicles and buses. They also described ways in which technology will make car sharing even more convenient than it is today. They said we need to “get ahead” of such technologies. In some cases, participants expressed concern that we are behind—or seem to be behind – in implementing new technologies to improve transportation efficiencies.
- ***Data coordination is vital.*** Participants spoke about the need to promote cross-jurisdictional data coordination. In some cases, they spoke about lack of data, lack of data compatibility, or simply lack of data sharing.

### **Goal 5: Enhance Environmental Quality, and Protect natural and Cultural Resources**

- ***Emphasize public health.*** Participants said that a greater emphasis should be placed on the strong linkages between public health and active transportation.
- ***Evaluate transportation and land-use options for climate change impacts.*** Participant said that in seeking to reduce greenhouse gases, the region needs to focus on evaluating the potential impacts of land-use changes and transportation investments.

### **Goal 6: Support Inter-Regional and International Travel and Commerce**

- ***Airports are economic engines for the region.*** Many participants generally commented on the important economic role of airports, including for freight.
- ***Airport access is a continuing challenge.*** Participants in several sessions noted that airport access is inadequate.

## WHAT CAN/SHOULD THE TPB AND COG DO IN THE FUTURE?

To close the conversations, participants were asked what the TPB and COG should do to further promote implementation of the principles of the RTPP and Place + Opportunity. Some the ideas that were suggested are listed below:

- **Regional Planning**
  - **Scenario analysis** – Translate the RTPP’s strategies into specific scenarios and analyze what the impacts and benefits would be.
  - **Regional inventory of planned unfunded projects** – Develop an inventory of unfunded transportation projects that are in the approved plans of the TPB’s members jurisdictions. Such an inventory can be potentially used for future analysis, including scenarios.
  - **Define, clarify and focus upon true regional challenges** – Focus on things that can only be accomplished if we work together – and the benefits of doing so.
- **Technical Assistance**
  - **Support and expand high-payoff, low-cost technical assistance.** Examples include the TPB’s Transportation/Land-Use Connections (TLC) Program and the ULI Technical Assistance Program.
  - **Provide information and analysis for decision-making related to Activity Centers.** Examples could include information on how to reduce parking requirements, what density thresholds are needed to support transit, or how (re)development can occur in underutilized Activity Centers on the eastern side of the region.

## VI. NEXT STEPS

This report will be used to inform future work activities that will follow up on the RTPP. Such activities may include new outreach, regional analysis, and a refocusing of programs regarding technical assistance.