

H-GAC Technical Advisory Committee meeting notes

H-GAC 2nd Floor Mtg Room - January 14, 2009, 9:30 am

Approval of Transportation Control Measures and Voluntary Mobile Emission Programs for Houston- Galveston-Brazoria

Shelley Whitworth of the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) presented possible Transportation Control Measures (TCMs) and Voluntary Mobile Emission Programs (VMEPs) to reduce emissions in accordance with the Houston-Galveston-Brazoria State Implementation Plan (SIP). The emissions reductions focus primarily on nitrous oxide (NOx) emissions, but volatile organic compound (VOC) emissions will also be reduced in the process. TCMs are voluntary, project-specific, on-road strategies that reduce vehicle use or congestion, while VMEPs are broader programs designed to reduce emissions but are not project-specific. TCMs focused on pedestrian and bicycle improvements, while the VMEPs involved a wide variety of projects.

A preliminary list of TCM and VMEP measures was presented to the Transportation Policy Council (TPC) in November. TPC requested that H-GAC return with cost effectiveness estimates for the proposed TCMs, as well as a specific list of proposed VMEPs. The VMEP strategies have gone through an initial round of committee review and public comment.

Whitworth reported that she was "up against a wall" in terms of timeline and has to bring the TAC-approved recommendations to the TPC when it meets January 23. Then she must return the recommendations to H-GAC in early February and final recommendations to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) on Feb. 20.

The recommended VMEPs were divided into four categories – alternative commuting strategies, regional intelligent transportation system strategies, recommended vehicle retrofit and replacement strategies, and "weight of evidence" strategies, at an estimated cost of \$458 million. The goal is to reduce NOx emissions by 3.99 tons per day by the end of 2018. "Weight of evidence" strategies involve measures known to reduce emissions but hard to quantify. Recommendations included pay-as-you-drive auto insurance, limits on idling of heavy vehicles, and enhanced enforcement for smoking vehicles.

Several TAC members wanted more information on the funding sources, particularly how much would come from the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) Improvement Program and how much would come from the Surface

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Transportation Program (STP). Others wanted more detailed information about the projects. One member expressed caution about committing to those funding levels at a time when the federal government will be more fiscally restrained. A motion was made and seconded to vote on the reduction levels (3.99 tons per day), but not the funding levels. The TAC approved the NOx reduction levels unanimously.

Update on the TxDOT 2030 Committee

Tim Lomax of the Texas Transportation Institute presented the findings of the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) 2030 Committee. The 2030 Committee consists of 12 members appointed by TxDOT Chairwoman Deidre Delisi. The committee reported in December that Texas will need \$313 billion (in 2008 dollars) in transportation spending over the next 22 years. Taking yearly expenditures and inflation into account, the Committee estimates that the state will have spent between \$490 billion and \$500 billion by 2030. Of the \$313 billion, according to Lomax, \$171 billion will go toward traffic congestion, \$89 billion will be spent paving roads, \$36 billion will be used to build and maintain bridges, and \$17 billion will go toward building four-lane divided roads to improve rural mobility and safety. The 2030 Committee only estimated expenditures; a separate entity is calculating projected revenue to meet these costs.

Lomax said that the committee looked at four possible funding scenarios for traffic congestion: "current funding trend," "maintain economic competitiveness," "prevent worsening congestion," and "reduce congestion." He warned that the current funding trend would triple the annual commuting delay by 2030, meaning that the average commuter would spend 90 hours ever year (at least two full work weeks) going to and from work. The Committee did not recommend any particular strategies, but instead will leave those decisions to local policymakers.

The performance measures used by the Committee included peak and free-flow traffic speeds, delay reductions, the Texas Congestion Index (a value of 1.5 means that an average trip takes one and a half times longer during the middle of the day than during non-peak times), and the total costs and fuel consumption caused by traffic delays.

\$55 billion of the total would go to the Houston region, although congestion would increase slightly rather than remaining at current levels. According to Lomax, congestion

will increase significantly in the rest of the country, meaning that maintaining current congestion levels in Texas will provide cities statewide with a relative economic advantage.

One TAC member noted that outgoing U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters recently said that the majority of rush hour drivers are not commuters and asked if there was a way to approach this “low-hanging fruit” to encourage people not to run errands or other trips during rush hour. Lomax said that those decisions would have to be made by local officials.

Another TAC member asked about TxDOT’s influence in the 2030 Committee. Lomax stated that Chairwoman Delisi appointed the board and that TxDOT representatives attended each meeting, but the department had no influence over the decisions the Committee made.

Legislative Update

Transportation issues in the upcoming Texas legislative session will focus on “tolling in the broader picture of funding transportation,” according to Pat Waskowiak of H-GAC.

Sen. John Carona (R-16), the transportation chair from the Dallas area, has proposed indexing the state motor fuels tax to the cost of constructing roads (Senate Bill 217). Rep. David Leibowitz (D-117) from San Antonio has proposed expanding the Texas Transportation Commission from five appointed members to 15 elected members (House Bill 12), as well as limiting any Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) votes related to toll roads to elected officials (House Bill 15). (This would mean that groups such as Houston’s METRO would not be allowed to vote on such issues.) Rep. Leibowitz has introduced a number of other transportation-related bills. Sen. Robert Nichols (R-3), representing Conroe, Nacogdoches, and a number of counties north and east of Houston, has introduced a bill that would prohibit existing free roads from becoming toll roads in the absence of free and equivalent alternative route (Senate Bill 220).

However, Waskowiak said the state faces two financial challenges that make transportation policy difficult. Texas will receive less money from the federal Highway Trust Fund due to declining federal gas tax revenues, and it will receive less state tax revenue because of the recession. The recession also makes state lawmakers unlikely to increase the state motor fuels tax to provide revenue.

Waskowiak noted that the H-GAC Transportation Legislative Committee will be meeting on Tuesday, January 20 at 2 pm in Conference Room C. Representatives from the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG), the

Dallas-area MPO, will also visit H-GAC to talk about the possibilities of local project funding.

At the federal level, TxDOT has asked the state’s MPOs to coordinate lists of local, regional, and state transportation projects that may be eligible for funding from the proposed infrastructure stimulus plan. The MPOs will be responsible for prioritizing the lists. TxDOT estimates that \$20 billion will go toward transportation needs nationwide, with \$3.6 billion coming to Texas. Projects must be ready for bidding within 180 days, meaning they must have proper environmental clearance, rights-of-way, and other permits.

TxDOT will collect the lists and submit them to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). The stimulus money will not contain earmarks for specific projects, and will go through TxDOT.

Texas MPOs were asked Tuesday, January 13 to compile these lists, and they only have until the end of Friday, January 16. Waskowiak did not know how big the lists might be, but she said that MPOs would only have to prioritize the projects if the lists were too long, which was doubtful.

Waskowiak noted that the U.S. Congress may be less eager to pass an infrastructure stimulus package if the remaining \$350 billion in Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) funds are released as President-elect Obama has asked.

Texas City Connect Service

Alan Rodenstein of A&R Consulting Solutions, LLC reports that Texas City successfully began a fixed-route bus service on October 20. The service began over 25 years ago as a demand-only shuttle service, but Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and gas prices forced consideration of a fixed-route option.

Officials have set a first-year goal of over 30,000 riders, and at the end of November they were already halfway to that goal. Between October 20 and the end of November, rides were free. When \$1.00 fares kicked in on December 1, ridership dropped slightly, but January ridership is 10% higher than in November so far.

During 2009, they hope to extend fixed-route service, including the Mall of the Mainland to Galveston, La Marque to Texas City, a Pearland/Texas Medical Center park-and-ride, and a complementary Americans with Disabilities Act paratransit service in Texas City and Galveston.

The service currently has three vehicles, and within a year it should have eight.