

## H-GAC Technical Advisory Committee meeting notes

H-GAC 2nd Floor Mtg Room - February 18, 2009, 9:30 am

### Update on the Stimulus Package and Reauthorization

Ashby Johnson of the [Houston-Galveston Area Council](#) (H-GAC) noted that under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, highways will receive \$27.5 billion, rail will receive \$9.3 billion, and transit will receive \$8.4 billion. In addition, he said there will be \$1.5 billion in discretionary transportation funding.

Johnson said that Texas would receive approximately \$2.25 billion for highways, of which \$1.5 billion would go to the [Texas Department of Transportation](#) (TxDOT) and roughly \$140 million would go to the Houston region through H-GAC. He said that TxDOT must obligate half of the funds within 120 days and the other half within one year, while metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) such as H-GAC would have one year to obligate all of their funds. He said that H-GAC would not have a problem obligating its money within that timeframe.

Johnson said that in order to use this money, H-GAC had stipulated three requirements: a project must have 75 percent of its right-of-way acquired, its environmental work must be finished within three months, and its design process has to be completed or almost completed. He said TxDOT's preliminary considerations included statewide equity, economic growth, economically distressed areas like those affected by Hurricane Ike, safety projects, projects that TxDOT could leverage, and connectivity.

He indicated that some people think that all the money designated for MPOs is only for MPOs serving areas with more than 200,000 people. Johnson said that he doubted that was the case, but if it were true, it would increase the amount of money that the Houston region would receive.

A TAC member asked if all of H-GAC's requirements had to be met to qualify for funding, saying that design processes could be completed fairly quickly. Another member said that all three had to be met, but that under certain conditions there might be exceptions.

In addition, Johnson noted that Texas is expected to receive \$301 million for urban transit agencies and \$42 million for rural transit providers, with the latter administered by TxDOT. Of the urban funds, he estimated that the Houston Urbanized Area would receive about \$100 million. One TAC member

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said that the bill includes a category for small urban areas that would also be administered by TxDOT. However, she did not know if the category was already included in the urban figures. She added that the primary transit projects in rural areas would be bus replacement.

Johnson said that the [Federal Highway Administration](#) (FHWA) and the [Federal Transit Administration](#) (FTA) have 10 days from the date the bill was signed to inform states, MPOs, and transit organizations of how much money each will receive. The obligation timelines start as soon as that information is distributed next week.

Another TAC member asked if the projects would be judged not only on the number of jobs created, but also pay grade. Specifically, she hoped that the projects would create engineering, not just construction jobs. Several members indicated that pay grade would probably not be considered.

Later in the meeting, Johnson returned to the subject of the recovery bill, noting that the current transportation bill would rescind any unobligated transportation funds when it expired in September. He noted that this could cost Texas \$1 billion and told members to spend what money they could before that time. He said that Sen. Max Baucus of Montana had attempted to remove the rescission clause, but that as far as he knew, it was still in the transportation bill.

Johnson said he would be in Washington, D.C. over the next week to talk to the FHWA and FTA, and that he would report the results at the next Transportation Policy Council meeting on February 27 and the next TAC meeting on March 18.

### Report on status of transportation planning activities from member agencies

One member reported that Tuesday, February 24 was a transit lobbying day in Austin, and that anyone who happened to be near Austin should stop by to talk to legislators. Another member noted that the Grand Parkway Association signed the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Segment G in January, and that the public comment period on the EIS closes on March 16.

Johnson reported that 150 to 200 people attended a recent public meeting to discuss a proposed overpass on State Highway 6 at Farm-to-Market Road 529. He said most of the comments were in opposition to the overpass.