

## H-GAC Transportation Policy Council meeting notes

H-GAC 2nd Floor Mtg Room - January 23, 2009, 9:30 am

### Appointment of 2009 By-Laws Committee

Alan Clark of the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) noted that many cities in the 8-county area will surpass the 50,000 population mark in the 2010 Census. According to TPC rules, every city with more than 50,000 residents must have a voting representative on the Council. However, Clark said that the By-Laws Committee might want to consider a "departure" from that rule to prevent the Council from becoming too large and unwieldy. He noted that Dallas-Fort Worth gives voting representation to all cities over 25,000, but that its transportation policy council has about 60 members.

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett added that since Hurricane Ike, Galveston's population has dropped below 50,000, but that a special exception should be made to prevent the city from losing its voting representation on the TPC.

### Resolution for I-69 Corridor

Clark reported the recommendations of an advisory committee report on the I-69 Corridor. He noted that the recommendations called for utilizing existing highway corridors and rights-of-way to minimize the impact on local landowners – a "major departure" from the Trans-Texas Corridor concept.

He also reported on the so-called "Houston Intermodal Zone," an advisory committee proposed by the Trans-Texas Corridor project but never defined. The Houston Intermodal Zone, according to an approximate reference map created by TxDOT, would comprise most of Harris County and portions of several other counties, extending almost to Galveston. Clark noted that TxDOT wanted all Texas ports, including Galveston, to be part of a different advisory committee. Several TPC members expressed a desire to extend the boundaries of the Intermodal Zone to include the Grand Parkway and an intermodal rail depot west of Rosenberg. One of the members suggested that omitting the Grand Parkway from the intermodal zone could "shade someone's opinion" about the worthiness of the project. Clark reminded the members that the map was just a rough sketch, and that TPC needs to be involved in defining the zone's boundaries.

### Update on the TxDOT 2030 Committee

Before Tim Lomax started talking about the 2030 Committee, Judge Emmett, who served on the committee's board, said that the committee had not been all that he hoped. He said

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it failed to get into "theoretical" aspects about what the state would actually need by 2030, but focused instead on maintaining current infrastructure.

Lomax said that the 2030 Committee concluded that Texas will need \$313 billion in transportation spending over the next 22 years. Of that money, he said \$171 billion will be used to "prevent worsening 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."

As far as traffic congestion, the largest expenditure, Lomax said that the 2030 Committee identified four potential funding levels: "current funding trend," "maintain economic competitiveness," "prevent worsening congestion," and "reduce congestion." For each scenario, the committee produced estimated investment costs and resulting congestion costs:

Funding level	Investment cost	Congestion cost	Total cost
Current funding trend	\$70 billion	\$515 billion	\$585 billion
Maintain economic competitiveness	\$124 billion	\$295 billion	\$419 billion
Prevent worsening congestion	\$171 billion	\$220 billion	\$391 billion
Reduce congestion	\$213 billion	\$160 billion	\$373 billion

According to Lomax, the committee recommended "prevent worsening congestion" because, in its view, preventing worse congestion would give Texas cities a relative economic advantage over other cities nationwide, where congestion is expected to worsen. The committee decided against reducing congestion because, in Lomax's words, the return ratio at that point was roughly 1:1, and the committee decided the extra investment was not worth the money.

After Lomax's presentation, Judge Emmett clarified his earlier remarks. He said that the 2030 Committee turned into an effort to tell the legislature what it would cost to maintain what the state already has. As a result, it barely considered commuter rail, high-speed rail, and other alternative modes of transportation.

## **Report on Status of Transportation Planning Activities: Economic Stimulus Package**

Clark reported that without the proposed economic stimulus plan, the region would face a highway funding shortfall of \$700 million. He said that the region might receive over \$300 million in transportation funding, but that the actual number could be completely different. He added that in the proposed bills, there is a small amount of federal discretionary money for transit, mostly through increased formula grants, but that he had not seen any projected numbers for the region or for individual cities.

Clark said that the stimulus projects should not replace the existing "level of effort," meaning that stimulus money would not be used for projects that are already in the works. The only time that might happen, he added, would be in case another project was not yet "shovel-ready."

According to Clark's "best guess," projects must meet a number of standards to be eligible for stimulus funding. The projects must be in the current Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) and Transportation Improvement Program (TIP); conform to air quality standards and federal environmental regulations; have completed or nearly completed plans, specifications, and engineering (PS & E); have state approval or be nearing state approval for PS & E; and be ready for contract letting in 90-180 days. A TPC member added that projects must also have most of their rights-of-way acquired, which Clark affirmed.

Clark presented a list of all the potential projects compiled by H-GAC at the request of TxDOT. The list was compiled from the region's cities, counties, and transit agencies, and he noted that it might not be complete because some cities might not have responded to H-GAC in time. He said he would be turning in the list to TxDOT later in the day.

According to Clark, H-GAC categorized the projects into three phases: Phase I (ready to go in 90-180 days), Phase II (180 days-1 year), and Phase III (more than one year). The agency did this because the proposed stimulus bill would contain strict deadlines by which the money must be spent.

The next step, he said, was to seek public comment on the list of projects, since it contains several projects not currently on the TIP. Fort Bend County Commissioner James Patterson, who serves as the TPC Chairman, asked if public comment was necessary for the entire list, or just for the individual projects. Clark stated that public comment could be sought on just the projects not currently on the TIP. He

said, H-GAC will continue consultation and analysis on project readiness. He said that the TPC may have to act at the February meeting and prioritize the list, since it is likely that the region will get less than half of the money it requests.

He provided three possible prioritization methods for members to think about: prioritizing by which projects are the oldest, prioritize projects within the Houston Urbanized Area and leave most of the rural projects to TxDOT, and prioritize by project type, such as maintenance or new construction.

One of the TPC members suggested that the Council could also prioritize based on which projects would create the most jobs. He suggested that new construction would probably create more jobs than other projects.

Clark said that TPC approval and prioritization of the list would likely be required by the end of February, and suggested that the Council may wish to conduct an additional meeting or workshop before the next scheduled meeting on February 27. He said the meeting could either take place on Friday, Feb. 13 or Friday, Feb. 20. He asked Chairman Patterson if the Council would like to make that decision today, and Patterson said that the decision could be made later, especially since the stimulus bill has not yet passed. Clark said that the TPC must remain flexible since Congress has not acted yet.

One member asked if the federal money would be project-specific, and Clark answered that it would not. Patterson asked if the 30-day public comment period was necessary, or if H-GAC could simply use projects already in the TIP and that had already received comment. Clark answered that all the projects on the list had been vetted, but not all had been included in the TIP because of a funding shortage. Patterson warned that the TPC must approach the issue carefully to avoid setting itself up for a "beating" within the community.

One of the members asked if some of the TIP projects were unfunded, since the majority of the projects on the stimulus list were already in the TIP. Clark replied that even though all TIP projects are supposed to be funded, a funding shortfall meant that some of the TIP projects had no allocated money.

Clark concluded by reminding members that the stimulus package, if passed, would not provide funding for all the projects on the list. He said that TxDOT turned in a list with over \$6 billion in projects, including \$700 million for TxDOT projects in the Houston area, but that the state is expected to receive perhaps \$2.5 billion. He said that TxDOT will post every project online in order to increase transparency.