

H-GAC Transportation Policy Council notes

February 27, 2009, 9:30 am

Agenda item #3: Public Comments

The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) Transportation Policy Council (TPC) heard numerous public comments at the beginning of the meeting. Most of the comments concerned an [amendment to the 2008-2011 Transportation Improvement Program \(TIP\)](#) or the list of proposed stimulus projects. The TIP amendment would remove a proposed overpass at the intersection of State Highway 6 and Farm-to-Market Road 529, preventing its construction.

About 150 people showed up at a public meeting on February 10 to discuss the proposed amendment, the vast majority of whom opposed the overpass. During the entire public comment period, H-GAC received 39 comments supporting the overpass and 257 comments opposing it. Concerns focused primarily around business impacts, loss of property value, and cost-effectiveness. Three people spoke in favor of the overpass at the TPC meeting and four spoke against it.

Most of the remaining comments concerned projects seeking funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), and specifically [Segment E of the Grand Parkway](#), which would receive \$181 million under current plans. Three people spoke in favor of the Grand Parkway while six people spoke against it. The proponents argued that the Grand Parkway would get ahead of growth, rather than lagging behind, and provide a hurricane evacuation route.

The opponents argued that the stimulus money should go toward projects where people are, rather than developing an expensive new road in unpopulated areas. Several argued that the money should be spent on repairing existing infrastructure, not building new infrastructure.

Agenda item #6A: Resolution for Approval of Amendments to the 2008-2011 TIP and 2035 RTP

After the public comments, the TPC approved the TIP amendment, removing the overpass from the list and preventing its construction. One member voted against the amendment.

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Agenda item #8: Resolution for Approval of Project Recommendations for American Recovery & Reinvestment Act

Note: The [stimulus list](#) contained a number of last-minute changes that were not available publicly until the TPC meeting. These changes are highlighted on the document. The [original list](#), as well as the [project descriptions](#), is available at the H-GAC website.

Alan Clark of H-GAC reported that, under the ARRA, Texas will receive \$2.25 billion for highways, of which \$1.5 billion would go to the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and \$150 million would go specifically to the Houston area through H-GAC. He also estimated that TxDOT would spend roughly \$285 million of its money in the Houston region.

Clark presented several lists of projects. The first was a list of statewide projects in the Houston area, followed by a statewide contingency list. The third list was H-GAC approved projects, followed by another contingency list. The statewide projects must be approved by the TxDOT with the concurrence of the TPC, while the H-GAC projects are selected by the TPC with the concurrence of TxDOT. Holmes said that the contingency lists were provided in case one of the main projects was not be ready in time.

TxDOT has 120 days to allocate the first half of its money and one year to allocate the remainder. H-GAC has one year to allocate its portion of the money. Clark noted that the numbers he cited earlier were minimums, and said that while H-GAC and TxDOT would have no trouble obligating their funds, other agencies in other states might not meet the deadlines, and TxDOT and H-GAC might be eligible for some of that money.

Clark said that he would discuss transit funding at the next TPC meeting on March 27, but that the transit funding rules had not been firmly established yet. He said that Texas will receive \$301 million in urban transit funding, of which \$93 million will go to the Houston Urbanized Area. He also said that the state would receive \$42 million for rural transit, which would be allocated by TxDOT. Transit agencies will have 120 days to obligate half of the funds and one year to obligate the rest.

Clark said six criteria were established to determine whether or not a project was “shovel-ready” and worthy of stimulus funding: safety, significance, leverage, long-term benefits, economic distress, and equitable statewide distribution. He said that for statewide distribution, TxDOT had established four regions in the state. Houston is in the eastern region.

Clark recommended that the TPC select the oldest, unfunded TIP projects first, followed by projects that were not in the TIP but were consistent with conformity, and then projects that retained local funding commitments and helped leverage other funds.

Holmes said that statewide, nine of every 10 projects considered for stimulus funding did not make the list. He also noted that the Segment E project had been revised. Previously, the northern half of Segment E was on the main statewide stimulus list at a cost of \$181 million, while the southern half was on the contingency list at a cost of \$216 million. Now, he said, the entire segment was on the main list, although the \$181 million figure had not changed.

Holmes added that some of the TxDOT money would be moved from new projects to maintenance, since \$1.2 billion over the last five years had been switched from maintenance to new capacity. He also defended Segment E, saying that in several decades on the job, “I’ve not been involved yet in [a big project] that wasn’t controversial.” He said that several previously controversial projects were now widely acclaimed, such as the Chimney Rock bridge and the dredging of the Houston Ship Channel. He said that the Grand Parkway was in front of the growth curve and would provide another hurricane evacuation route, and that acquiring stimulus funds for Segment E could “induce the entire Grand Parkway to be built.”

Art Storey, executive director of the Harris County Public Infrastructure Department and a TPC member, agreed with that assessment, saying, “The doing of it [building Segment E] will make the doing of the rest of it more likely and more feasible.” Several other TPC members spoke in favor of the Grand Parkway, and none spoke against it. The stimulus list passed unanimously.

The Texas Transportation Commission, TxDOT’s governing body, will vote on the list of recommendations on Thursday, March 5, 2009.