

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY COUNCIL



COMMITTEE REPORTS

June 8 – August 10, 2011

Regional Transportation Advisory Council Committees

Freight – Walter Bonin & Dom D'Eramo

The Freight Committee met on June 8 at 1:00 PM. In attendance were Walter Bonin (Marlborough), Dom D'Eramo (Millis), Schuyler Larrabee (Boston Society of Architects), Richard Flynn (Eastern Massachusetts Freight Rail Coalition), Marilyn Wellons (Riverside Neighborhood Association), Laura Wiener (Arlington), Lynn Vikesland (Massport), Arnold Pinsley (resident of Natick), Bob Gentile (resident of Framingham), Bill Kuttner (MPO staff), Mike Callahan (MPO staff), Paul Nelson (MassDOT), and Tim Doherty (MassDOT).

The meeting began with an announcement from A. Swaine of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). She shared a list of locations in New England where locomotive idling has led to complaints to the EPA. The EPA would like to meet with the Massachusetts Railroad Association to discuss the problem and solutions. The EPA and many of its grants support rail as a sustainable transportation choice, but the idling issue is very important to them.

M. Callahan provided an update on recent MPO freight studies. The MPO completed a freight study in 2007 that described freight issues and operators. A second study funded in 2010 Unified Planning Work Program is analyzing several impacts from trucking in the Boston region. A second phase of this study is planned for the coming year. The second phase will build on the findings of the first phase. Another freight study was included in the draft 2012 Unified Planning Work Program, which will be out for public review later this summer. That study will seek to survey truckers about what they are hauling and their origin and destination.

In response to M. Callahan's comments, R. Flynn expressed concern that Congress is considering increasing the weight limit for trucks to 97,000 pounds. This will reduce the attractiveness of shipping containers by rail and put more trucks on the roads. Adding 17,000 pounds to the container weights will decrease their ability to double stack containers on rail, which will undermine many public investments made to allow double stacking. The cost of this bill will be passed onto the public, who will pay more for road maintenance and safety problems. MPO staff will need to consider this as it conducts its freight and highway studies. P. Nelson of MassDOT said the agency has no formal position on the issue of legal truck weight.

D. D'Eramo added that the weight limit increase will be especially harmful for the state's bridges. The MPO and state should identify small parcels of land that could be used for intermodal distribution centers. Building intermodal distribution centers closer to Boston may reduce truck miles traveled in the region. P. Nelson said the state looked for 100 acre parcels, but the MPOs may want to look at smaller potential sites.

Following the announcements and related discussion, Paul Nelson and Tim Doherty of MassDOT provided an update on freight and rail planning at MassDOT. They also discussed the Advisory Council's comments on the State Rail Plan. D. D'Eramo expressed disappointment with the MassDOT response to the Advisory Council's letter.

T. Doherty said the Rail and Freight Plans intended to set up broad strategies and different investment scenarios. The scenarios are neither exclusive nor inclusive. They provide a framework to evaluate projects that may come to the DOT. Developing an Industrial Rail Access Program is important to the DOT. MassDOT supports allocating public funds to private projects if there is a strong public benefit, but they do not want to take a heavy-handed approach. The Advisory Council has pushed for a greater public role than is appropriate in Massachusetts. MassDOT does not want to pick winners and losers in the private sector.

The State Freight Study made it clear that short line railroads are very important in New England. There may be potential for short line railroads in eastern Massachusetts in the future, but that will be a private sector decision. Freight decisions are made in the private sector and they are determined by competition. The state is not in the business of moving goods. P. Nelson later added that as the owners of many rail assets in eastern Massachusetts, MassDOT may have opportunities to encourage freight rail.

Summary of Member Comments:

- The Advisory Council wants to better understand MassDOT's policies and help support MassDOT. There is a lot of knowledge and interest in effective state transportation planning among Advisory Council members. (W. Bonin)
 - In response, T. Doherty said the projects the Advisory Council submitted for the Long-Range Transportation Plan are interesting ideas and worth focusing on.
- Other states are doing more than Massachusetts to support rail and their ports. Short sea shipping will grow in importance. Ports that compete with Boston are preparing for short sea shipping. It is in the state's interest to have a viable freight rail system. The state needs to pick winners and losers. (R. Arena)
- The Freight and Rail Plans leave a lot of unanswered questions. MassDOT has entered the railroad business by purchasing rail lines. The Advisory Council would like the state to use the rail lines for more than one use. Payments from freight operators to use the lines can help offset losses from the passenger services. (R. Flynn)
- Many other major regions in the eastern U.S. are investing in rail access to ports. Increased trade with Asia and the widened Panama Canal make this important. (L. Elisa)
- The state clearly picks winners and losers. MassDOT should do what is best for the state and create jobs. We should not turn jobs away because of philosophy. (W. Bonin)
- MassDOT needs an executive that is a freight champion. Richard Davey does not have enough time to focus on freight given his work for the MBTA. (D. D'Eramo)

Plan – Schuyler Larrabee

The Plan Committee met on June 30 to discuss several timely topics related to the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP). In attendance were Chris Anzuoni (Massachusetts Bus Association), Louis Elisa (Seaport Advisory Council), Schuyler Larrabee (Boston Society of Architects), Bob McGaw (Town of Belmont), John McQueen (WalkBoston), and Laura Wiener (Town of Arlington). Among the Plan-related topics discussed were the following:

- The draft set of projects selected by the MPO
- Bicycle projects
- The pros and cons of including a list of illustrative projects

The Committee was pleased that several projects supported by the Advisory Council were included in the MPO's draft set of projects. However, there was concern among some members that the Community Path Connector in Somerville was not included. This led to an extensive discussion about the value of bicycle projects. This discussion also addressed a related motion made at the June Advisory Council meeting by Rick Arena (Association for Public Transportation). The motion, which was tabled until a later meeting, called for the Advisory Council to not support bicycle projects until the MPO's fiscal situation improves.

Committee members agreed that the MPO should continue to support shared-use paths. The paths have health benefits, support the goals of MassDOT's Healthy Transportation Compact and GreenDOT policy directive, and give people a cost effective way of traveling in the region, which is important given the high price of gas and uncertainty about the future price.

Committee members then discussed three specific projects that the MPO considered. Some members expressed support for the Somerville Community Path Connector because it would fill a gap in the regional bike network between the Minuteman and Charles River Paths. It would also give transit users a safe way to access stations along the proposed Green Line Extension.

Committee members also expressed support for the Bruce Freeman and Assabet River Rail Trails, but questioned the transportation benefits of them. It was suggested that these trails would have more recreational than transportation benefits. It was also suggested that the Assabet River Rail Trail be the higher priority of the two because the two phases of the Bruce Freeman will not connect unless the Concord Rotary project is constructed. It was not included in the LRTP.

The Committee agreed that not all shared-use paths are equal, and suggested that the MPO establish evaluation criteria to guide investments in these projects. Among the criteria suggested were the following:

- Number of transit users that will use the path to access a station
- Number and size of activity centers connected by the path
- Number of cars removed from the roads
- Ratio of utilitarian trips to recreational trips
- Will the path be lighted?
- Will the path be cleared of snow?

- Level of community support

The Committee also discussed the pros and cons of including an illustrative projects list in the LRTP. A summary of the Committee's thoughts are listed below.

Pros

- An illustrative projects list is a good place to collect ideas.
- An illustrative projects list would allow the MPO to highlight connections that could be made in the transit system if more funding were available.
- The MPO can express its vision for the future through an illustrative projects list. A compelling vision can encourage the Legislature to provide more transportation funding.

Cons

- The current illustrative projects list includes a lot of maintenance projects. Many of these should instead be included in the fiscally-constrained LRTP.
- The projects on the illustrative projects list cannot be advanced. The Federal Highway Administration will not review work on these projects.
- There are no difficult tradeoffs involved in deciding whether or not to include a project on the illustrative projects list.

Mike Callahan of the MPO staff shared Westwood representative Steve Olanoff's comments on the issue. S. Olanoff was unable to attend the meeting. He supports including the North-South Rail Link on the illustrative projects list. He does not support the inclusion of maintenance projects or the expansion of Route 3 on the South Shore.

The Committee agreed that the MPO should include illustrative projects in the LRTP.

Nominating – Malek Al-Khatib

The Nominating Committee met on Wednesday, July 20 to discuss the election of officers for the year beginning October 1, 2011. The entire Nominating Committee was in attendance. The members include Malek Al-Khatib (Boston Society of Civil Engineers), Kurt Mullen (Needham), Richard Canale (MAGIC), and Steven Rawding (Mass-DOT Aeronautics Division).

M. Callahan of the MPO staff reported on the nominations received as of July 19. Monica Tibbits of the 128 Business Council was nominated by Laura Wiener of Arlington for the office of Vice Chair. M. Tibbits accepted the nomination. No nominations have been received for the office of Chair.

Members discussed the ideal qualifications for the office of Chair. M. Al-Khatib said experience is important. R. Canale said that the Advisory Council has debated whether experience is more important than getting new people involved. Recently the Nominating Committee has placed a higher priority on getting new people involved.

M. Al-Khatib recommended having a balance between municipalities, state agencies, and advocacy groups represented as officers. In his opinion, it would be preferable not to have both

offices occupied by representatives of the same type of entity. R. Canale said he has no problem with both offices being held by an advocacy group. The MPO is expanding in November by adding municipalities. The advocacy groups and state agencies will grow in importance as more municipalities get involved directly at the MPO level.

M. Callahan added that the MPO would like the Advisory Council to be the conduit for involvement of state economic and environmental agencies, as well as advocacy groups.

The Nominating Committee agreed to meet again on August 1 to discuss all of the nominations and develop a recommendation.

On August 1 the Nominating Committee voted to recommend Steve Olanoff for the office of Chair and Monica Tibbits for the office of Vice Chair.

The following committees did not meet and have not scheduled future meetings:

Executive – Laura Wiener

Membership – Steve Olanoff

Programs – Richard Canale

Transportation Improvement Program – Monica Tibbits

Unified Planning Work Program – Steve Olanoff

Transportation Planning and Programming Committee Subcommittees

No subcommittees of the MPO's Transportation Planning and Programming Committee have recently met.