

Public Comments on Proposed Transportation Improvement Program Project Cost Policies

October 17, 2021

Matt Genova
TIP Manager
CTPS
Boston Region MPO

Dear Mr. Genova,

I congratulate you, the CTPS staff and the Ad Hoc Committee for your work and your new TIP policy recommendations. As a Belmont resident that has witnessed the evolution of the Belmont Community Path project, I strongly agree that this new policy is urgently needed and urge the Board to approve these policy changes on November 4th.

I had not planned in sending you a public comment. But the remarks by the Belmont representative at the recent MPO Open House has motivated me to address the points raised in her remarks.

First, project budgeting. Belmont claims that it has aimed for keeping the project's budget under control. But I have witnessed the opposite: there are municipalities such as Belmont that seem to view MPO funding as a bottomless money well. I have heard cries from a town official urging to increase the budget. Hence, what was a modest bike path became a plan for a multi-user path with water fountains, benches, bike racks, lights and requiring extensive use of retaining walls. Hence, there is indeed a need to protect MPO'S funds from municipalities that, under the current policy, are tempted to abuse the MPO's generosity.

Second, project oversight. Although Belmont claims to act responsibly and judiciously, the reality is that the current path hugs a live rail and, in at least one section, Belmont has chosen to flout the MBTA's safety recommendations; a public official has vowed to go to Governor Baker if need be to keep the plan regardless of how the MBTA views its safety. What may be at risk here are the lives of families abutting this project and the lives of those riding the rails. Hence, there is need for oversight during the planning process so that time and money are not invested in flawed vanity projects.

Third, support for the new policy recommendations. Belmont claims to support the policy changes. In reality, this summer, Belmont developed a plan to subvert the new recommendations by lobbying municipalities that are MPO Board members to vote against the policy changes that tighten the purse strings. Part of this plan was to recruit two Board members (viewed as representing vulnerable minorities) to be the ears of Belmont at the Board's internal discussions. This also points to the need for oversight and funding control.

In closing, I attended/viewed all of the Ad Hoc Committee meetings and I was left in awe of the massive amount of data distilled into easily understood slides, the deft handling of the process by Chair Bourassa and the thoughtful discussions by the committee members. Thanks for the work that has resulted in these much needed recommendations.

Sincerely,

M. A. Leza
Darin Takemoto
Belmont, MA 02478

October 17, 2021

I applaud the draft policy changes. Some towns are deliberate in their attempt to manipulate the process to their advantage and increased controls are necessary. In the case of Belmont they Town tells the abutters that changes to the plan to accommodate abutter issues can occur after the 25% design process, so they are either lying to abutters or the MPO. One additional thing the MPO should consider is informing the Towns that use of federal funds would subject them to investigations by the office of the inspector general for waste fraud and abuse, and that intentional acts could be considered criminal. An example of such acts is the Belmont Community Path proposal. Federal funds have not yet been assigned to the Belmont Path so a referral cannot yet be made. One such example is cost controls prior to application to the MPO. The Town selected the most expensive route to accomplish the task for no legitimate reason. At a public Board of Selectman's meeting (recorded) I asked why the Town chose one half-mile segment over another, because it could have lowered the project cost by \$3.9 million dollars. Selectman Adam Dash replied that the State (ie MPO) would pay for the construction costs and if it costs more, its the States concern not Belmonts. This kind of attitude is exactly why cost controls are necessary.

Cosmo Caterino

October 18, 2021

Jamey Tesler
Chair, Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization
10 Park Plaza, Suite 2150
Boston, MA 02116
cc: Matt Genova, TIP Manager

Subject: Public Comment on the Draft Policy Changes for the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization's (MPO) Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)

Dear Mr. Tesler,

Thank you for organizing the subcommittee to review the project processes of the MPO and related cost inflations. I have attended several of the subcommittee meetings in part or whole, remotely, and have been positively impressed with the high quality of the deliberations, the consensus built by the subcommittee members, and the resources reviewed to develop recommendations. I do not know the depths of the material considered, but offer some public comment of the proposed policies based on my knowledge having attended some of the meetings and my experience in my own community, as well as my experience of being a resident in the metro Boston area since 1998.

I am familiar with the work of the MPO most recently by way of my service as a Belmont School Committee (SC) Member and SC Representative on the Belmont Community Path Project Committee. These views are my own and do not necessarily reflect the whole bodies of committees on which I serve.

I support the 3 complementary policy changes in policy recommendation #1, however I have some concerns about the main recommendation to the extent that it may discourage projects to be developed and/or to be supported in the originating community or region. Municipalities own the bulk of the roads but not the proportionate quantity of funds, as such being placed on the TIP is a significant incentive.

Would the complementary policy changes be adequate to prohibit unreasonable cost overruns due to scope creep or schedule lag? Concurrent with the possibility of being removed from the TIP (rec #3)? I wonder if the committee would consider implementing the 3 complementary policy changes in #1, before the primary recommendation. I firmly believe the processes would help the project stakeholders to identify where there is a current or anticipated cost overrun, which is the goal of the recommendations. And, in general, these types of overruns are important for all transit development stakeholders to be informed on, as well - even sharing with so-called competing MPO applicant parties.

For recommendation #2, I fully support these recommendations and would like to add 2 items for consideration: 1) that remote meetings continue to be utilized, as they offer a more equitable participation option for many stakeholders – many working professionals are capable volunteers but discouraged from the travel time for Boston-based meetings and time from work day, remote meetings are here to stay and enable greater participation from stakeholders; – and 2) to ensure that projects that are necessarily expensive are not disadvantaged from the funding process simply based on their uniquely high costs.

For recommendation #3, I am very pleased to see the rubric that the committee has considered and support this recommendation, particularly as it allows project stakeholders to improve their projects relative to the matrix which I believe would be a mutual/regional benefit overall. Given the other steps the committee has outlined, it seems a very rare event for a project to hit \$2.5 million or 25% overrun, however should that happen, it would be important for the committee to have a fair assessment of all projects at that point in time to avoid any one project being disadvantaged uniquely.

Thank you for reviewing my comments and for taking up this issue as an ad-hoc committee.

Best,
Catherine Bowen