

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION

ADVISORY COUNCIL



David Mohler, Chair
Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization
10 Park Plaza, Suite 4150
Boston, MA 02116

Re: Draft Federal Fiscal Years 2021-2025 Transportation Improvement Program

Dear Mr. Mohler,

The Regional Transportation Advisory Council (Advisory Council) is an independent group of citizen and regional advocacy groups, municipal officials, and agencies charged with providing public input on transportation planning and programming to the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO).

The RTAC has reviewed and discussed the draft Federal Fiscal Years (FFYs) 2021-2025 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and offers the following comments.

1. The Advisory Council appreciates the MPO's commitment to meeting funding targets by project category as set forth in the Long Range Transportation Plan, and especially the significant investment made in recent TIPs and the proposed FFYs 2021-25 TIP in Complete Streets projects.
2. The Advisory Council is pleased to see the Community Connections program funded and looks forward to seeing the results of the first five projects proposed projects, as well as additional programming of funding in future years.
3. The Advisory Council appreciates the continued time and effort of the MPO to measure and address equity in project scoring, project selection, and overall evaluation of the TIP.
4. Given the limited funding available for new projects in 2025, the Advisory Council concurs with the approach of funding the highest scoring project(s) in each funding category.
5. Considering the limited funding available in 2025 and the current balance of funding directed to Major Infrastructure projects, the Advisory Council agrees with the decision not to fund the McGrath Highway project in 2025. The Advisory Council nevertheless believes this is a worthwhile project with important community benefits and hopes that it can be funded in 2026 and beyond.
6. The Advisory Council is concerned about the extent of cost increases for projects already in the TIP (31 of 47 projects, with 19 increases over \$1 million), and concerned that if this trend continues, future TIPs may not be able to meet expectations that are originally set, requiring more projects to be pushed out to later years or not funded. This may have a compounding effect as project delays can lead to increased costs. The Advisory Council suggests considering the following options:

- a. Can the MPO and/or the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) provide incentives and/or resources to encourage better cost estimation at the beginning of the project? For example, project sponsors may be warned that their project risks being delayed or deprioritized if cost increases exceed a threshold. Also, we would find it helpful to have a better understanding of how MassDOT assesses the reasonableness of cost estimates.
- b. With the proliferation of smaller projects, the MPO has been making programming decisions earlier in the design phase (before 25% design is complete), which provides municipalities with the confidence to spend scarce resources to complete project development. However, costs can be very uncertain at this early stage, increasing the likelihood of later cost increases. Would it be possible for the MPO to do an early preliminary scoring of projects to give project sponsors an indication of how competitive the project might be, while holding the actual programming decision until the project is more well-developed and costed? Also, might it be possible to provide financial assistance with design for high-scoring projects?
- c. Can the MPO continue to look for ways to consider projects on a cost-effectiveness perspective (benefits per dollar)? This would further help the MPO and municipalities judge which projects are most likely to be programmed and worth moving through the entire design phase.
- d. Can efficiencies be found through value engineering for larger projects, such as was performed on the Green Line Extension?

The Advisory Council greatly appreciates your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,

Lenard Diggins
Chair, Regional Transportation Advisory Council