I-93 Transit Investment Study

Technical Advisory Committee Meeting Summary
Thursday, February 15, 2007
1:00 PM

Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation

Attendance

TAC members who signed in:

Lynn Ahlgren	Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation (EOT)
Paul Hajec	Northern Middlesex Council of Governments
Bill O'Donnell	Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) – New Hampshire
Kit Morgan	New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT)
Ram Maddali	NHDOT
Bill Cass	NHDOT
Matt Caron	Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission
Anthony Komornick	Merrimack Valley Planning Commission
Rosemary Monahan	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Andrew Motter	Federal Transit Administration – Region 1
Cliff Sinnott	Rockingham Planning Commission
Dennis DiZoglio	Merrimack Valley Planning Commission
Jim Gallagher	Metropolitan Area Planning Council
Bruce Kaplan	Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization - Central Transportation Planning Staff

Other attendees:

Former.Mass. State Rep. John A Businger	National Corridors Initiative
Tom Irwin	Conservation Law Foundation
Arthur B. Cunningham	Sierra Club

Consultant staff:

Ken Kinney	HNTB Corporation
Marcy Miller	Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.
Dennis Coffey	HNTB Corporation
Addie Kim	HNTB Corporation
John Weston	Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB)
David Nelson	Edwards & Kelsey (E& K)
Yawa Duse-Anthony	E& K

Welcome and Introductions

Lynn Ahlgren welcomed everyone and asked that each individual introduce him or herself. Ken Kinney reviewed the agenda for the meeting. The three items to be discussed include the draft purpose and need statement, initial transit alternatives, and the upcoming public meetings.

Purpose and Need

Ken Kinney used power point slides to show the framework and selected text of the draft purpose and need statement. Comments and questions related to the draft purpose statement included:

- There was a question regarding the geographic locus of the mobility improvements. Ken replied that generally, improvements are intended to address longer distance work trips originating in the northern portion of the study area that are destined for the southern portion of the study area.
- There was a question about whether or not the term "employment centers" include those not in the central Boston area, such as those along 128 or 495. Ken noted that these areas would certainly be included, though Boston is considered to be the major destination for this study in order for any proposed transit service to have enough riders to be cost effective. Boston is still has the most concentrated density of jobs in the region.
- There was considerable discussion as to how narrow the focus should be on the I-93 corridor, with some indicating that the study may be shifting from its original target.
- There was a suggestion that the purpose statement be tied more closely to the original mandate that included phrases such as reduce pollution, reduce congestion, etc. Reference was made to the bi-state MOU that defined the overall purpose of the cooperative effort.
- There should be clear language about promoting transit supported land use.
- The phrase "establishing additional transportation modes" should be changed to "enhancing existing or establishing additional transportation modes."
- The phrase "increase mobility options" should be changed to "research / identify future transit options."
- Purpose and need should not be focused exclusively on Boston based trips, but rather the larger metro area needs to be served. Ken Kinney and David Nelson commented that transit systems require density (of people and jobs) to work effectively, but that a system may also serve the more dispersed sectors as long as there is a base of support for the main line operation.
- Simply stated, the study should evaluate and determine future transit investments to meet mobility needs of residents in the region.[Bill Cass]

Ken reviewed the draft need statements and the goals and objectives with the TAC. One comment related to the goals and objectives was that there was too much overlap in the goals and objectives, causing confusion. Ken next reviewed the evaluation criteria, where there were now three new evaluation measures. They were land use/development impacts, environmental impacts, and public support. Comments and questions related to the evaluation criteria included:

- A concern that user cost is already reflected in ridership. Ken agreed that user cost should probably be removed from the list. [slide 11].
- A question whether cost benefit would be included in user benefit. [Yes]
- A question about cost effectiveness vs. user benefit was raised – and discussed.

Ken then led a discussion of the problem statement – with many good points contributed by the TAC members, including:

- It was noted the 5 points (slide 6) identify different aspects of the overall problem – the lack of mobility options in the study area.
- The goals and objectives seem to be redundant – overlap.
- References to New Hampshire should also generally include Massachusetts.

A discussion of evaluation criteria led to inclusion of additional criteria:

- Public support to provide funding, and resolution of other public concerns (NIMBY issues)
- Operating and maintenance costs must also be included in evaluation of alternatives and determination of cost-benefit factor. Baseline is no-build alternative.

A discussion ensued regarding farebox recovery ratios – with the finding that MBTA commuter rail fare box recovery runs in the 36 – 40 % range.

It is noteworthy that the current transit share of trips from New Hampshire to the "inner core" of Boston is 11% - a very healthy share of the market considering the lack of "convenient" transit options. This is based on the 2000 Census "journey to work" data. It was noted that the viability of transit services is based on the worth of the effort to the consumer – they will make the effort if the overall service meets basic mobility needs, is safe and consistent.

Ken next reviewed the existing conditions in the study area, including highway volumes and existing transit service. TAC members stated that the Office on Energy and Planning released new 2030 population forecasts in January 2007.

Several technical comments were made and noted, especially concerning presentation options for data (i.e, numbers vs percentages, graphs for some data, and putting all the data into the study context). The Team will make changes consistent with these suggestions.

Ken suggested that all additional comments on the purpose and need statement and existing conditions should be submitted to Dennis Coffey by February 23, 2007.

Initial Alternatives

David Nelson, from E & K, discussed in detail three potential rail corridor alignments. The Eastern corridor would make use of the abandoned Manchester and Lawrence branch (M&L), connecting with the existing MBTA Haverhill Line to North Station. The Highway corridor

would use the proposed transit reservation within the I-93 right-of-way south from Exit 5 to a point near Rockingham Park, where it could connect to the M&L and on to North Station. The Western corridor would go from Manchester to Lowell on the B&M New Hampshire Main Line. From Lowell to North Station, it would use the existing MBTA Lowell Line. He discussed the potential services on each of these corridors and the estimated travel times.

Study team members and some TAC members noted that the projected travel times would not be acceptable to the public, especially if they have to change modes to complete their trips. David acknowledged that the alternatives with the longer travel times would likely get eliminated very early on in the process, but to be fair, they must be considered initially.

Concern was expressed that downtown Manchester or the Manchester Airport needed to be the northern terminus of the service to encourage reverse commute ridership.

Questions and comments were raised about the need for double tracking of the MBTA line between Lawrence and Reading, potential speed restrictions on the M&L branch (due to local concerns) and the need for the northern terminus to be Manchester (or at least the airport). TAC members discussed short segments that could serve as initial or start up segments of the full length as well as mixed services (e.g., bus and rail). The importance of the Manchester airport was discussed.

Three of the alternative routes involve transfers (from one vehicle to another at some point in the route) thus suggesting the "transfer penalty" will impact ridership. This is true, but may also offer a range of equipment and technology options to address during the next pahse of alternatives analysis. A brief discussion of "DMU" rail technology and "BRT" bus services helped to provide some context of these options. The team will also review the recent TCRP study that evaluates the use of highway shoulders for bus services. Massachusetts has been using their shoulders to accommodate their traffic volumes for several years.

It was also noted that the planning horizon for the study is 2030 – so that the strategic plan will be based on assumptions of what conditions will be at that time (population, land use, roadway conditions, etc.). Interim steps (minimum operating segments) will also be a part of the strategic planning process.

Public Meetings

Marcy Miller stated that the team is starting to prepare for the two upcoming public meetings by creating a brochure, press packet, a second fact sheet, and a letter to the editor of the Union Leader, and other local media. The two public meetings, one in New Hampshire and one in Massachusetts, are going to be held in late-March or early-April. Meeting locations under consideration include the Windham Town Hall and the Methuen City Hall. Topics covered at the meetings would include the purpose and need and the initial transit alternatives, including suggestions that the TAC members had regarding these elements. An "Open House" concept meeting is planned, with a brief presentation and time for more one on one interaction with team

members. The team will coordinate with CTAP to perhaps piggyback onto one of their already scheduled meeting efforts.

TAC members suggested that the first Stakeholder Meeting be held before the public meetings. Ram Maddali suggested sending an email out to the TAC requesting the name of a representative from each agency in the Public Involvement Plan who would participate on the Stakeholder Committee. Marcy asked if there is a preferred location for the Stakeholder Committee meeting, and Merrimack Valley Planning Commission Conference Room was suggested. Again, this meeting will also be coordinated with the CTAP process.