

## **The Effectiveness of Planning Structures**

Transportation and transit planning in the region are carried out by a consortium of local and regional agencies, principal among which are the Metro Planning Commission, the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT), the Metropolitan Planning Organization, and the MTA. These agencies, along with local governments in the region, all participate in the regional transportation and land use process created under the guidelines of the Federal government. The roles of these agencies with respect to the current plans reflect the constituency to which each agency is responsible.

- The MTA is responsible for a short-range transit plan that focuses on the details of transit operations in Davidson county
- The RTA has lead technical responsibility for a multi-county commuter rail plan
- The Metro Planning Commission, which also serves as the staff to the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) that allocates Federal transportation funds, is the lead agency for the transit development plan. The Planning Commission offers a tie to land use planning for the county and the metropolitan area, while the RTA and MTA deal with transportation issues only.
- The Tennessee Department of Transportation has historically focused almost exclusively on surface road planning and construction.

Our assessment of the effectiveness of this planning structure considered several factors:

- Staff capabilities to support a continuous planning process;
- The integration of planning activities among the responsible entities, particularly the ability of the planning structure to define a consistent and meaningful context for transit investment
- Representation of MTA interests in a broader discussion of transportation programs.

### **MTA Staff Capabilities To Support A Continuous Planning Process**

It is important to maintain a continuous planning process because transit and transportation programs typically take several years to bring to fruition, and the policy and financial landscape in which they operate is constantly changing. Monitoring of these changing conditions, and subsequent refinements to a plan, are as important as the original plan itself. Whether the plan is prepared in-house or by contract, the process of monitoring and refinement requires a staff that is qualified to perform the work and has sufficient depth to make the effort worthwhile.

Our analysis of transit planning staff capabilities focused on the MTA. For all practical purposes, the MTA has very little in-house planning capability, and no one dedicated uniquely to transit and transportation planning. While the MTA does have a position titled “Director of Scheduling and Service Planning”, this

job is focused on day-to-day bus service issues; adjusting schedules, preparing for service changes, special event planning (e.g., Titan service), and preparing monthly Board reports on service. Until very recently this position was also responsible for maintaining personal computers at MTA. Not surprisingly, this Director's participation in regional transit planning has been limited. With little or no internal staff devoted to broader planning issues, MTA's representation in regional planning issues has been largely limited to the participation by the Executive Director.

The Metro Planning Commission does county planning and is the staff of the Metropolitan Planning Organization. The Commission appears to be well staffed with qualified planners that serve as staff to both the county planning activities as well as the Metropolitan Planning Organization. Membership of the MPO is comprised of Davidson, Rutherford, Sumner, Williamson, and Wilson counties. The MPO approves the regional transportation improvement plan and allocates regional Federal transportation funds.

The RTA has a transportation planning mandate for a nine county area that includes Davidson County. The staff of the RTA consists of one person. Considering the broad geographic reach of this agency, this limits the agency's focus to special projects that fall outside the bounds of the Metro Planning Commission or the MPO. These RTA projects have included the commuter rail plan, vanpools, and sponsorship of long-distance commuter express bus services.

#### **Integration of Planning Activities**

Transit, transportation, land use and financial planning activities are most effective when they are integrated — that is, when planning for related issues is done in concert by the agencies that are responsible for implementation of those plans. Because plans usually are predecessors to the investment of public funds, integrated planning activities help to ensure that public services are planned to assure efficient use of resources and the achievement of common objectives by projects that have an impact on one another.

Although planning activities can be integrated in a variety of ways depending on prevailing circumstances, the most common approach when two or more agencies are involved is to separate the activities longitudinally. In this manner, one agency taking the long-term view, and one or more agencies that may be functionally distinct (e.g., transit and highways) focusing on short-term or implementation planning. This nested approach to planning provides a broad context for public investment in which the contribution of each element to achieving long-term regional land use and transportation goals can be better understood.

As recently as a year ago, this type of context did not exist for transit planning in Davidson County. Transit plans, historically, were developed infrequently, were usually project-specific (e.g., light rail,

commuter rail), and appeared to focus on solutions in absence of a clear definition of the problem. The 1991 Transit Development Plan did initiate a number of studies and projects but was complicated by other municipal initiatives and funding issues. The current organization of planning activities in Davidson County is rather new, but holds promise for a more integrated approach to transit planning and development.

The Transit Development Plan (TDP) being managed by the Metro Planning Commission should result in a long-term view of transit investment priorities that are tied to the County's development plans. Ideally, this longer-term view should provide direction for both transit service plans and funding that reflect the Metro government's and the region's development objectives. This should allow the Metro government and the MTA to have a mutually understood view of the financial requirements and expected contributions of transit. The TDP will also link to the metropolitan transportation plan, which is adopted by the Metropolitan Planning Organization as a precondition for the receipt of Federal transportation funds.

The short-range transit plan (SRTP, discussed in detail in the next section) is appropriately assigned to the MTA. A SRTP usually focuses on incremental adjustments that conform the transit system to the prevailing metropolitan transportation plan. The current SRTP has a slightly broader focus, including the definition and evaluation of alternative route structures and services, which is appropriate since the TDP effort is just now getting underway. Future SRTP updates should be "nested" within the policy and funding espoused in the TDP.

Within Davidson County, then, the current allocation of long-term planning to the Metropolitan Planning Commission, and short-term planning to the MTA, is a logical means of integrating and coordinating the interests of Metro and the MTA – assuming an adequate complement of planners and clear and consistent policy direction.

The integration of planning activities between the MTA and RTA occur on an as-needed basis, for specific projects. These include the commuter rail plan, extension of MTA express bus routes, and the vanpool program. This less formal, ad hoc integration of activities is not problematic, provided it does not conflict with policies, funding, and performance expectations that are established between MTA and the Metro government.

### **Representation of MTA Interests**

The most important planning contacts for the MTA are the Metro Council, Mayor, the Metro Planning Commission, the Regional Transportation Authority, the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), and Tennessee DOT. Collectively, these entities provide the vast majority of external funds on which the MTA depends.

Currently, MTA is represented by the Executive Director at the staff level on the MPO and in planning work being performed by the Metro Planning Commission. The MTA Executive Director participates in the oversight of the Transit Development Plan, and, along with the MTA Director of Capital Projects, sits on the Technical Coordinating Committee of the MPO. In our opinion, the effectiveness of the Executive Director's participation would be enhanced if MTA had technically qualified planners to carry more of the workload, and leave the Executive Director to participation in the higher level planning and policy issues.

There is no direct linkage between the MTA Board and either the Planning Commission or the MPO. Thus, MTA's input on regional planning issues is limited to that provided by the Executive Director. A representative of the Mayor's office represents the Metropolitan Government on the MPO Board.

### **Conclusions**

- Transportation and land-use planning at the Metropolitan level is structured in a traditional pattern in which the region's local governments and transportation agencies participated in a joint program designed to conduct transit and transportation planning in the context of larger regional issues.
- The MTA does not have an adequate planning staff to participate effectively in regional transit, transportation, and land use planning.
- The current short-term and long-term transit plans are not integrated with other planning activities in a way that will assure compatible and practical proposals, but an overall regional planning and policy structure is in place to allow this integration.
- The integration of long term plans, prepared by the Planning Commission, and short-term plans, prepared by the MTA, should result in a more fully informed understanding on the part of the Metro government of MTA's funding needs and service priorities.
- The MTA has actively participated in regional planning efforts, but its effectiveness is limited by the absence of a planning and analysis staff within the agency, and by the other demands on the time of the Executive Director.
- Representation of MTA interests could be improved by changes to its Board structure that link membership to one or more of the policy bodies that allocate funds to the MTA, as well as an expanded internal planning staff.
- The fact that the MPO staff and the MTA are both "county" agencies provides a locus for the coordination of transit, transportation, and land use planning for the county, as well as providing an additional link between the MTA and longer range regional issues.

### **Recommendations**

- Responsibility for long-range regional transportation and transit planning should be concentrated in the Metropolitan Planning Commission (long-range planning of 5+ years), with involvement by the RTA in projects that occur outside of the County.
- Analysis of current services and the development of short-term transit plans should be the responsibility of the MTA and coordinated with the Planning Commission.
- The planning resources of the MTA should be expanded to support an internal management planning program, increased short range service planning and analysis, and maintenance of a proper transit planning activity.
- The MTA's short term service and capital plan should be part of an overall business plan that includes staffing and personnel plans, financial capacity analysis and planning and labor planning.
- Long-range transit plans should develop transit investment proposals in the context of economic and community development and multimodal transportation objectives of the metropolitan area.
- Short-range transit plans should focus on implementation of long-range transit strategies, and provide a basis for the capital improvement plan and the annual budget.
- Recommendations regarding the structure of the MTA Board discussed in the *Governance* section of this report will provide needed structural linkages between the MTA and other policy bodies.

### **Cost Implications**

The major cost implication of this set of recommendations is the enlargement of the planning staff. The cost of a new planning director has been included in the cost implications of the reorganization included in the *Governance* chapter. We estimate that the cost of providing one or two additional planners as follow:

Salary \$40,000 plus benefits at \$10,000 (25%) = \$50,000 per planner annually.