

Short-Range and Long-Range Planning Efforts and Other Studies Underway.

Four major planning efforts are underway that directly affect the MTA. In order of their stage of development, these are:

- a commuter rail plan, developed over the past several years
- a short-range transit plan, now being completed
- a transit development plan, now in process
- a regional transit funding analysis

The MTA is the managing contractor for the first two studies, and directly manages the short-range planning work effort. The Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) is the lead technical agency for the commuter rail study. The Metro Planning Commission, which also serves as staff for the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), is the lead agency for the longer-range transit development plan. The MPO is managing the regional transit funding analysis. This funding analysis was not included in the scope of this review.

We evaluated these planning efforts from several perspectives. First, we assessed how MTA was managing or otherwise participating in the studies. Second, we evaluated how the scope of work would prepare the MTA to meet future transit needs within its service area. Finally, we looked for logical connections, particularly with respect to the operating and financial impacts of the strategies being considered. In the course of our analysis, we interviewed planning staff at the MTA, Metro, and the RTA, and reviewed the scopes of work for each study.

Commuter Rail Planning

Commuter rail planning has been underway since 1996, when the RTA and MTA jointly participated in a study to evaluate the potential for commuter rail in the Nashville region. The 1996 study report identified six corridors for further evaluation. A 1998 study refined this list to three corridors, from which the East corridor was selected as the first priority for implementation. This is a 31-mile alignment, with five stations, between downtown Nashville and the City of Lebanon in Wilson County.

While much has been accomplished on the rail project, there are still a number of hurdles to overcome before plans can be finalized. This audit has focused on the ramifications to the MTA of ongoing involvement in short and longer term rail plans. Obviously the agency must maintain a posture of flexibility regarding rail projects given the current level of uncertainty.

Preliminary engineering was completed on the 31-mile East Corridor plan in early 2000, and the project is now in final engineering. According to a report submitted by MTA to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for the most recent "New Starts" report to Congress, capital costs for the project are estimated to be \$30 million in year-of-expenditure dollars, and operating costs are estimated to be \$2 million annually.

The project is planned to operate on an existing rail line owned by the Nashville and Eastern Railroad Authority (N&E), a governmental entity comprised of the Tennessee Department of Transportation, Wilson County, the cities of Lebanon and Mt. Juliet, and the Metro Government of Nashville and Davidson County.

To date, the project has been jointly managed by the RTA and the MTA. Because the proposed system spans multiple political jurisdictions the RTA has taken on the coordination role between the various local officials. The RTA and MTA have jointly directed the consultants who were hired to perform the original study and the subsequent preliminary engineering and environmental studies. This has included preparation of the request for proposals, evaluation of bidders, and management of work-in-progress. Consultant selection was made by a committee comprised of representatives from the MTA, RTA, and from Metro, Wilson County, and the City of Lebanon. The RTA is the grant recipient project manager for funds applied to the project. The Executive Director and the Capital Planning Manager represent MTA in these efforts.

Short Range Transit Plan

The preparation of the new short-range transit plan (SRTP) commenced in July 2000. Preliminary reports are currently being reviewed by the MTA. The plan's focus is service evaluation of the MTA system. It is being performed by outside contractors. Other than special planning efforts (e.g., commuter rail and light rail), this is the region's first transit development plan since 1991.

The SRTP will cover the next five-year period. It is being prepared primarily by a consultant team (Urbitran), working with the MTA staff. According to the consultant's scope of work, the plan will include a service design plan, an implementation plan, a financial plan, and a capital plan.

The tasks in the scope of work include:

- Project initiation/goals & objectives
- Evaluation of fixed route service
- Service standards
- Fixed-route bus system analysis and route diagnostics
- Bus system alternatives and evaluation
- Final system redesign plan.

The planning effort is being managed by the MTA Executive Director. MTA staff involvement has been limited to providing data to the consultant on the front end, then reviewing and critiquing on the back end of the study. Although the MTA has a scheduling and service planning department, the two-person staff is small for a system of its size and necessarily occupied by detailed scheduling activity and service monitoring. (See discussion in *Planning Structures* section.)

The SRTP has several scope limitations that should be corrected in future generations of the plan:

- First, there is little consideration of ACCESSRIDE and vanpool programs, though these are growing parts of MTA service and need to be considered in a full set of service plans.
- Second, there is no mention of the commuter rail plan in the scope of work, including the bus feeder system requirements, or other financial and operational implications.
- Third, there is no analysis of management systems or actions that may be necessary to manage the service and cost implications of the plan's recommendations.
- Finally, there is little to no participation in the planning process by MTA's funding partners.

A broader view of the SRTP - for instance its use as a business planning document as well as a bus route planning document - would help the MTA realize and prepare for the implications over a longer-term horizon.

Transit Development Plan

The Transit Development Plan (TDP) is being prepared by the Metropolitan Planning Commission, with the assistance of an outside contractor. The TDP has a longer time horizon and a different focus from the SRTP and will present prioritized transit improvements for four, five-year increments beginning in 2005 and extending through 2020. The TDP is designed to develop transit improvements in the context of regional development patterns and highway projects. Development of the plan started in October 2000 with completion scheduled by late 2001. The MTA has been involved in the TDP from its inception, commenting on the draft scope, consultant selection, and with membership on the steering committee by the MTA Executive Director.

By examining the contribution of different transit strategies to the achievement of regional development priorities, the rationale for transit investment in the Nashville region can be stated in the context of transit's role in supporting the region's land use, transportation, economic, and social policy goals.

Conclusions: Current Planning Projects

With respect to the current planning projects and their impact on regional transit and the MTA specifically, we noted the following:

- The transit development plan being developed by the Metropolitan Planning Commission should provide a useful context for setting priorities for future modifications and investments in transit.
- The MTA technical planning capacity is too small to play a proper role in transit and transportation and land use planning for the future.
- Due to the small size of the MTA planning staff, too much of the planning function is vested with the Executive Director. Based on our experience with other transit systems, the MTA planning function is not large enough to provide the necessary checks and balances on operational and financial commitments required for solid system planning.
- The short-range transit plan and the commuter rail plan were developed independent of one another, and do not address the combined effect of the plans on MTA operating requirements and financial capacity
- The SRTP places too little emphasis on ACCESSRIDE and the potential use of the ACCESSRIDE system as a substitute service for low performing fixed route services.
- The SRTP will help the Board, staff, and Metro to focus on the types of service improvements needed for the short term, and how to make decisions relating to service evaluation and implementation.
- There is no multi-year business plan to guide MTA management efforts with regard to non-fixed route services, performance, internal resource allocation, financial planning, labor and personnel planning, human resources, systems, or asset replacement.

Recommendations

- The MTA should establish a planning function that meets the needs of the organization.
- With an expanded function the Executive Director will be able to delegate more responsibility for plan development and representation of MTA on technical committees.
- All MTA planning efforts should include a financially-constrained plan that serves as the baseline for evaluating new services and funding strategies, as well as an unconstrained plan that is built on “what-if” financial assumptions and real-world needs assessments that illustrates a larger strategy.
- MTA should expand the focus of the short-range plan to improve its use as a management tool for evaluating current and prospective performance assessments. This would incorporate ACCESSRIDE and vanpool assets in the service mix.
- Note: Recommendations to help resolve issues surrounding the financial condition of the MTA are addressed in the *Cash Management* and other sections of this report.

Cost Implications

The cost of the additional staff is included in *Planning Structures* and *Governance* sections.

The costs of implementing new services that may be adopted from the ongoing planning projects could be significant, depending on the extent of their recommendations and the determination by the region's policy makers to undertake the recommended service changes. These costs would be included in the recommendations of any such studies.