

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY COUNCIL



February 24, 2011

David Mohler, Chair
Transportation Planning and Programming Committee
Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization
State Transportation Building
10 Park Plaza, Suite 4150
Boston, MA 02116

RE: Draft transportation needs assessment

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 by the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) with providing public input on transportation planning and programming.

The Advisory Council and its Plan Committee recently met to discuss the draft transportation needs assessment associated with the next Long-Range Transportation Plan, *Paths to a Sustainable Region*. The Advisory Council strongly supports the MPO's work to identify the transportation needs in the Boston region. We offer the following suggestions, listed below by topic, to improve the needs assessment. We also identify needs that we think should be a priority, and needs that we think are important, but were not included in the needs assessment.

General

- The document is more than 500 pages long. A summary that prioritizes the needs will make the document more useful to the public. The summary should include references, including hyperlinks in the web version, back to relevant parts of the corridor chapters.
- All transportation needs should be listed, including those that may not be in the MPO's purview. Examples include the needs of private transportation providers such as bus companies and freight rail carriers.
- The economic development considerations of the region are missing. The assessment makes no connections between economic development needs and the projected needs of the transit and highway systems.

Project Selection

- The region's needs should be prioritized. Prioritization will make the needs assessment a more effective guide for decisions about which projects and programs to fund.

Providing transportation policy advice to the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization

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- The needs should be organized by category in order to achieve a mix of projects. Projects should then be prioritized within their category.
- Funding should be distributed equitably across the various categories.

Highways

- The summary should identify specific interchanges and intersections most in need of improvements. Currently it includes just segments of freeways and arterial highways.

Transit

- The MBTA and other regional transit authorities have serious and urgent maintenance needs. Needs that are part of the MBTA's \$3 billion backlog of state of good repair maintenance projects should be identified.
- The needs assessment should identify opportunities for increasing interconnections between various modes within the overall system.
- Privately funded transit services are not well identified in the needs assessment. Private bus routes should be better identified because they can fill some of the gaps in the public transportation system.
- There is a need for regional transit authorities to better communicate their services to businesses and people who are willing to use transit in order to increase ridership.

Freight

- More comprehensive freight-related data is needed. An especially important need is information about how the predicted 70 percent increase in freight volume between now and 2030 will affect the region's transportation system.
- Freight leadership is needed within MassDOT to focus on improving the efficiency of the existing freight distribution system and plan for future expansion.
- Among the pressing existing needs of the freight distribution system are:
 - Freight rail needs to continue serving the region's core in order to alleviate highway congestion. The need for freight distribution facilities inside Route 128 should be identified in the needs assessment.
 - Deepening the Boston Harbor approach channels and connecting rail to the port are needs because the Panama Canal is being widened and larger container ships may visit Boston.
- Looking to the future, in order to develop a more sustainable freight distribution system, the following issues should be addressed:
 - Approximately 90 percent of freight in the Boston region is moved by truck, which is a less sustainable option than rail or ship.
 - Most of the transportation infrastructure in the Boston MPO region is government owned. Ongoing maintenance and reconstruction should in all cases address the potential as well as existing needs of freight transportation.
 - The industry standard for weight allowed on freight rail tracks exceeds the weight limit of 263,000 pounds on most state-owned rail lines. State-owned rail lines

should meet the national 286,000 pound rail car weight standard. This would increase the willingness of freight rail customers to locate or expand in eastern Massachusetts. The limit inhibits the fluid movement of rail cars.

- Land use rezonings are often favoring residential over industrial and commercial use. To maintain a viable freight rail system, local governments need to provide incentives to retain industrial zoned property, and maintain freight rail terminals and rights of way in the Boston Region MPO area, where truck congestion is a growing concern. The MPO should communicate this more global need to the local communities.

Alternative Modes

- The impediments to shifting person trips from automobiles to transit, walking, and biking should be listed. There is a need to increase the use of alternative modes because our continued dependence on automobile travel is causing climate change, consuming large amounts of energy and land, and polluting the air we breathe.

We are pleased to learn that the needs assessment will be updated on an annual basis. We look forward to working with the MPO to refine the document each year and help make it a foundation of transportation decision making in the Boston region.

Sincerely,



Laura Wiener, Advisory Council Chair



Schuyler Larrabee, Plan Committee Chair