

PUBLIC GUIDE TO TRANSPORTATION DECISIONMAKING

I. Introduction

Have you ever wondered how decisions are made about transportation projects that affect your life? How do government officials decide where to put a road, bridge, transit line, bus line. How are these and other transportation projects planned? For many people transportation projects seem to come from nowhere, or they may remember a project promised years ago that is different than what they expected. How can you make sure your views are heard and considered by the planners, elected officials, engineers who make those projects happen?

Following is a guide to the transportation planning and decision making process in the Baltimore metropolitan area and how to best affect project decisions. This guide is intended to help you understand the process and laws so you can effectively participate in that process.

II. Citizen Participation in Your Government Decision Making Process

You may have wondered when driving through a highway construction zone just how that particular project was selected and funded. There are several opportunities and ways to express your thoughts about a transportation project. These include commenting at a public hearing or public meeting, and writing letters of comment to your local or state elected officials and/or to the appropriate transportation agency.

Many times ideas for transportation improvements originate from comments received directly from local citizens or citizens' organizations. This may vary from identifying ways to avoid or lessen the impact of a project on an affected community, or to recommend ways to benefit the community.

The sooner you make your views known about a transportation project, the more influence you will have, and the more you will be able to influence its outcome. Also, as a proposed project gets closer to the actual funding year for planning or design, the level of details on the project become more specific.

Federal, state, and local government regulations now require transportation agencies to solicit public comments on transportation plans and projects as they go from planning to construction stages. The National Environmental Policy Act requires agencies using federal funds for every transportation project that has a major environmental impact to prepare an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement (EIS); and to solicit public comment on the EIS. Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) requires a similar planning and environmental process for all of its transportation projects.

III. Transportation Planning in the Baltimore Metropolitan Area

Transportation decision making is carried out by several governmental levels: Maryland Department of Transportation, Baltimore Regional Transportation Board (BRTB), local governments, U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT).

A. **MDOT:** The Secretary of MDOT oversees several agencies, including the State Highway Administration, the Maryland Transit Administration, Maryland Port Administration, and the Maryland Aviation Administration. MDOT headquarters are located in Hanover, Anne Arundel County. MDOT oversees all transportation planning for these state agencies. MDOT receives planning and construction funds from federal and state funds. MDOT uses some of these funds for state projects and passes on the remaining funds to the BRTB for regional planning and to local governments for local transportation projects.

SHA: The State Highway Administration is responsible for the planning, design, construction, maintenance, and repair of all state highways and bridges. SHA headquarters is located in Baltimore City. SHA construction and maintenance facilities are located in several districts around the state.

MTA: The Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) is responsible for the planning, operation, maintenance, and repair of Baltimore metro bus system, Baltimore subway (Metro), light rail line, MARC commuter trains, and commuter bus service between rural Southern Maryland and Washington DC.

B. **BRTB:** The US DOT requires that each large metropolitan area have a metropolitan planning organization (MPO) to coordinate transportation planning in the area. In Baltimore, the Baltimore Regional Transportation Board fulfills this requirement. It is composed of elected officials who guide the BRTB. The BRTB is located within a larger planning organization, the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, (BMC). The BMC, previously known as the Regional Planning Council, was created in 1992. The BRTB is responsible for:

- Coordinating federal funding for transportation projects;
- Conducting transportation planning in cooperation with federal agencies, state agencies, and the operators of public owned transit services;
- Ensuring that transportation expenditures are based on a continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive (3-C) planning process;
- Providing reasonable opportunity for input from the public and interested parties.

The BRTB is an multi-member policy board consisting of the chief elected officials of the region and representatives from key state agencies. Members include representatives from the cities of Baltimore and Annapolis, and Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Harford, Howard, and Queen Anne's Counties. State agencies represented on the Board include

Maryland Departments of Transportation, Environment, and Planning, and the MTA. In addition, several technical committees and a Public Advisory Committee advise the BRTB in specific technical and policy areas.

The BRTB is responsible for ensuring that the metropolitan area meets state implementation plans (SIP) for air quality, and that federal ADA and public participation regulations are followed in regional transportation projects.

C. Local government Transportation Departments or Department of Public Works: Each local government is responsible for planning, maintenance, and repair of local roads. This function is located in the Baltimore City Department of Transportation, and county departments of public works.

D. US DOT: The U.S. Department of Transportation, particularly the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) provides planning and construction funds to state and regional transportation planning agencies. These federal agencies also set the required planning process and regulations for state and regional programs. They also require public participation requirements for all federally funded transportation projects, and review of environmental impact statements.

IV. Types of Transportation Plans and Projects

There are three broad types of transportation planning in the region and state: long-range, short range, and project plans.

A. Long Range Plans: Long range plans go out twenty years or more based on transportation strategies to identify major projects. The State DOT prepares a Consolidated Transportation Plan as well as individual long range plans for SHA and MTA. The SHA plan identifies major projected state highway and bridge improvements. It includes a brief description of the improvement, the general location, boundaries of the study area, cost estimate, approximate time frame, and project justification.

The MTA also prepares a long range plan which identifies the project mode (bus, subway, light rail, MARC train), location, time frame, cost estimate, project justification, effect on level of service.

The BRTB prepares a 20 year plan that is updated every 5 years. In November 2015, the BRTB adopted Maximize 2040 which has a target year of 2040. The plan sets the region's broad transportation goals and strategies. It includes a list of the major highway and transit projects the region expects to implement between 2020 and 2040. The BRTB held a number of public meetings to obtain public suggestions for projects to include in the plan.

In addition, local governments prepare long range comprehensive plans which include a transportation component. The other components often include land use, housing, economic development, environmental and other elements.

B. Short Range Plans:

The three levels of government prepare short range plans ranging from three to six years. Every year the state DOT prepares a Consolidated Transportation Plan (CTP) that presents all transportation capital projects proposed for planning or construction during the next six years. The plan is presented in draft form to each of the local jurisdictions. The final plan is presented to the General Assembly in January of each year. Both MTA and SHA also prepare their individual capital improvement programs which are a subset of the CTP.

Every year BMC updates a three year capital program called the Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) which lists all the state and local projects scheduled for planning, design , or construction that will utilize federal transportation funds.

Each local government prepares a capital improvement program that identifies all projects in the county planned for the next five or six years and a capital Budget that highlights all projects that will receive funding for planning, design or construction in the coming fiscal year.

C. Project Plans:

For each capital project at the state or local level, the responsible agency prepares a detailed plan for that project which includes: a map and site plan showing the detailed location of the project, alternative alignments, any changes in the proposed right of way; adjacent property affected by the project; a time frame for the design, engineering, and construction of the project, and cost estimates for each phase.

V. How and When to Best Make Your Interest in Transportation Projects Known

A. Self Education -studies, reports, newsletters, meetings

The first step a citizen concerned about a proposed project should do is to educate himself on the details of the project: the purpose of the project, its time frame, funding source, cost, proposed route or right of way. This may require reading transportation planning documents, attending public information meetings and public hearings, talking to elected officials and transportation planners, and reviewing environmental impact statements.

Often times a transportation agency responsible for preparing a large project or long range plan will prepare a newsletter or news releases of the status of the plan. Citizens should sign up to receive these newsletters and announcements of meetings.

Involvement - Public hearings and public meetings are great opportunities for citizens to make their thoughts and concerns known. Citizens also can provide local information at these events that the transportation planners are not aware of. In addition, the transportation agency may form advisory committees of residents and stake holders affected by the project.

Citizens also are encouraged to write letters to the transportation agency and elected officials expressing their thoughts on a project. Citizens can also write letters to their local newspaper, invite transportation officials to speak at local community meetings.

Finally, citizens can vote at election time on ballot initiatives and for their representatives who best express their views on transportation issues.

B. Commenting on Long Range Plans- SHA, MTA, BRTB, local governments.

SHA, MTA, BRTB, and each of the local governments prepare long range transportation plans as noted above. Funding for many of these projects is not expected to occur until the next decade or even further in the future. The BRTB long range plan begins with requests for citizen input on transit and highway projects, and public meetings in central locations in the metropolitan area. This plan is required by the federal government to be financially feasible based on the projected amount of funds available during that time period.

When local governments update their comprehensive plans they are required to include transportation projects. As these comprehensive plans are being developed and presented for public review either in public meetings or hearings, citizen oral and written comments can affect the final product.

While the details about a project that may be funded 20 years in the future may be vague, it is not too early to express strong feelings pro or con about the project to your elected officials and the transportation agency proposing the project.

C. Commenting on Short Range Plans - SHA, MTA, BRTB, Local government.

When the state or local transportation agency begins to fund the planning and design of a project the citizen has an opportunity to comment on a specific project. The responsible agency will usually evaluate alternative plans and design of the project, hold public information meeting(s) in the area affected by the project, meet with property owners directly affected by the project. If the project is controversial, a public hearing will be held.

The greatest opportunity to change the scope or location of a project is when it is in the planning and early design stages. This is the time when the interested citizen should be most active and express one's comments to the funding agency and local elected officials

This will require time by the citizen to study the project proposal, attend meetings, write letters, participate in a project citizen advisory committee, identify short and long range impacts on the local community. Once a project is in the final design or construction stage, it is very difficult to make major changes.

VI. Transportation Project Development Process

A. Studies: Comprehensive plans, land use, economic, population changes

Transportation plans are not developed from a vacuum. They are developed as part of comprehensive plans that include land use, economic and employment plans, population projections, water and sewer, and environmental considerations. When a citizen considers a transportation project, he should consider how that project fits in with other public and private plans for that area.

B. Transportation Plans: Alternatives, EIS, Public Meetings, Hearings,

A transportation plan starts with identification of an expressed need for that project and a proposed time frame reflecting the project's priority. The responsible agency then considers alternatives, costs and environmental impacts of each alternative, obtains public input, then begins plans for the selected alternative. An environmental assessment or environmental impact statement will be conducted.

The level of project complexity and controversy will determine the number of public meetings and hearings that are held. As plans for the project develop in the design stage the route alignment, Right Of Way (ROW) boundaries, time frame, and cost estimates are finalized.

C. Project Engineering: Preliminary, Detailed Cost Estimate

The next step after the project planning phase is to go into the engineering phase. Preliminary engineering of the project helps to identify unusual or unexpected problems, or changes in cost estimate. The further into the engineering of a project the more difficult it is for citizens to obtain changes to the project.

The transportation agency will then develop detailed engineering plans unless there are substantial changes in cost, time, or environmental impact. Detailed engineering involves

preparation of final construction drawings and specifications, and permit applications. Once detailed engineering plans are completed, a project is ready for construction

D. Project Construction: Construction Schedule

When construction funding is available, the responsible agency will bid contracts to build the project. It may be several years from when plans for the project were first announced. The schedule for construction should be clearly identified to the affected community, how detours of the construction zone will be laid out, and hours of construction will occur. The community can request that modifications to these details be made to reduce impacts on the local residents.

The citizens still have a role during this period to ensure that the construction contractor is following all of the environmental laws to avoid polluting the local air and damaging the local streams. If the local residents have problems with the construction period, they should contact the funding agency, local elected officials, their local or state environmental agency.

VI. Conclusions

The transportation planning process is usually long and complex, but it is not done in a vacuum or behind closed doors. Transportation agencies serve the public and want to provide improvements that help their communities. The most important lesson for citizens to remember is that the earlier they get involved and make their comments known, the more influence they will have on the final outcome.