

Questions persist as deadline for transportation plan draws near  
written by Newspark Team | July 27, 2013



The region's Long Range Transportation Plan identifies all the major transportation projects for which Charlottesville and Albemarle County can receive federal funding. But with only months to go before the plan must be completed and adopted, local officials and residents still worry about how the planning is being done.

At a meeting of the Metropolitan Planning Organization's policy board last week, officials learned that the first of two opportunities for public input on the plan will be in late August, but that little advertisement of the meetings has been done.

"How do people find about these meetings?" asked Charlottesville Mayor Satyendra Huja.

"It would certainly be helpful ... if we warned people this was coming up," added Albemarle Planning Commissioner Russell "Mac" Lafferty.

The board also wanted to know whether the public hearings would offer the chance for real involvement.

"We are in the final stretch of this, and it's going to be very hectic," said Sarah Rhodes, a transportation planner for the MPO. "We are trying to diversify the opportunities to comment and bring in as much comment as possible. We are, unfortunately, limited by time."

Time constraints also have forced the MPO to abandon an effort to seek advice on which transportation projects best fit the city and county long-term visions. At a work session in late June, Rhodes presented two possible scenarios to Albemarle and Charlottesville planning commissions.

"We created these worksheets to try to have commissioners say which scenarios pushed Comprehensive Plan goals. Unfortunately, that did not go as planned," Rhodes said. "The planning commissioners had many more questions, and bringing them to the table this late in the process was problematic."

One source of confusion for planning commissioners had been the way transportation projects were being selected without weighing their price tags.

"There are a lot more projects out there than there is money, so I would want to see which projects provide the most bang for the buck," Albemarle Commissioner Don Franco said at the work session.

Rhodes explained last week that although it seemed counterintuitive, considering cost now would prevent the MPO from crafting a truly long-range vision.

"That sort of fiscal constraint discussion comes later, because there's not a lot of money to work with," Rhodes said. "If we thought about just the projects we could build, there would be very few. We wanted to think more regionally and holistically."

MPO members also expressed concern about the modeling tool Long Range Transportation Plan staffers use to analyze which projects will most lower congestion. One project the model recommended was a bus route with greater frequency of service running from U.S. 29 to Pantops, possibly with a transit-only bridge across the Rivanna River.

John Jones, director of Charlottesville Area Transit, objected, however, that little improvement was likely to occur if buses were mired in traffic as soon as they reached Pantops.

"I know I'm not a voting member [of the MPO], but there are some misassumptions here with regard to transit projects," Jones said. "Some of this stuff is frankly impossible."

"You can't increase the headway if you can't move," Jones said. "That's the reason we haven't increased the headway already."

Rhodes said the Regional Travel Demand Model looks at scenarios that could improve the traffic situation 30 years in the future.

"[Enhanced frequency on] Route 10 may not be feasible now, but it's the route where we're seeing the most success," Rhodes said. "That's what the model is showing us."

"Free Bridge is a huge issue for us, and we're not doing anything at this point to address or alleviate any of the congestion on that piece of the roadway," MPO planner Marie Scheetz pointed out.

Morgan Butler, an attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center, voiced reservations about whether all decisions should be based chiefly on the computer model.

"[The model] is a key piece of the analysis, but ... it's not a great tool for looking at fine-grain transit improvements," Butler said. "My concern is that there are very important pieces of this plan that can't be done with the Regional Travel Demand Model."

But with the deadline for the Long Range Transportation Plan's adoption fast approaching, taking time to meet with transit experts and doing more detailed analysis appears unlikely.

"With this deadline, it appears that everything is being compressed. Is the deadline a statutory one? What happens if we need a couple of extra months to make sure we do the analysis right?" Butler asked.

Rhodes said that asking the Federal Highways Administration for more time was an option, but that it would be much better to finish the plan on time.

"I understand there are issues with this process," Rhodes said. "But we are where we are. We've been discussing this process for a year and a half, and now is not the time to change it."