

Regional Planning Advisory Council

Minutes of Wednesday, January 20, 2016

RPAC Members Attending:

Name	Representing
Samuel Adams	USAF/LRAFB
Kay Kelley Arnold	City of Little Rock
Charles Cummings (Chair)	Freight/Goods Movement
Jill Dabbs	City of Bryant
Ward Davis	City of Conway
Alex DePriest	City of Little Rock
Coreen Frasier	BACA
Leesa Freasier	Arkansas Dept. of Health (ADH)
Robin Freeman	Saline County
Becca Green	Rock Region Metro
Sybil Hampton	City of Little Rock
Paul Hastings	City of Little Rock
Amy Heflin (nonvoting)	Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
Antonio Johnson (Alt.)	Arkansas State Highway & Transportation Department (AHTD)
Kathleen Lambert (Alt.)	Rock Region Metro
Todd Larson	City of North Little Rock
Bob Lyford	City of Little Rock
Esperanza Massana	Arkansas Economic Development Commission (AEDC)
Shannon Newton	Arkansas Trucking Association (ATA)
Buckley O'Mell	Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce
Dan Roda	City of Little Rock
Carolyn Shearman (Alt.)	Sierra Club
Paul Simms	AHTD
Patrick Stair	Sierra Club
Jack Stowe	City of Maumelle
Tom Sutton	Clinton National Airport
Brad Walker	City of Little Rock
Dan Weathersby	Pulaski County
Amy Whitehead	City of Conway

Guests:

Jessie Jones	AHTD
Earl Mott	Garver
Noel Oman	Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
Jarod Varner	Rock Region Metro

Metroplan Staff:

Lynn Bell	Graphics Specialist
Casey Covington	CARTS Planning Director
Susan Dollar	Transportation Planner
Hans Haustein	GIS/Research

Daniel Holland	Planner
Jonathan Lupton	Research Planner
Richard Magee	Deputy Director
Jim McKenzie	Executive Director
Jeff Runder	GIS/Policy Analyst

1. Call to Order and Announcements

Chairman Charles Cummings called the meeting to order at about 11:33 AM. The Council met at 501 W. Markham Street, Little Rock.

Mr. Casey Covington introduced a new appointee to the RPAC, Ms. Esperanza Massana. Ms. Massana will represent the Arkansas Economic Development Commission (AEDC). On behalf of the Council, Mr. Covington welcomed Ms. Massana to the group.

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Council considered the Minutes of October 15, 2015. Two items were noted: (1) "trolley" was replaced with "streetcar" throughout; and (2) an incomplete sentence on page 6 was completed. The complete sentence now reads: "

MOTION by Mayor Jill Dabbs, second by Ms. Leesa Freasier

"To accept the Minutes of May 20, 2015, as corrected.

PASSED

3. Move Central Arkansas: A New Service Plan for Rock Region Metro

Ms. Becca Green introduced the speaker for Move Central Arkansas, Mr. Jarod Varner, Executive Director for Rock Region Metro. Mr. Varner presented a detailed summary of Rock Region's plan for service improvements and expansion. The complete presentation will be added to the RPAC website.

In the discussion that followed, Mr. Varner addressed questions about the upcoming quarter-cent county tax initiative. The tax would be a permanent, dedicated revenue source for Rock Region. If the initiative does not pass, the plan will be much more difficult to implement. Unfortunately, at present time Arkansas State law does not permit transit authorities to seek other avenues of dedicated revenue.

Mr. Varner added that Rock Region is running efficiently, and this past year actually requested less money from jurisdictions. However, implementing the Bus Rapid Transit element of the plan will require financial support from the jurisdictions, additional to the anticipated tax revenue.

Mr. Covington confirmed that Rock Region's plan is consistent with the Vision Plan of *Imagine Central Arkansas*. If the tax initiative passes, no amendment would be required for the financial plan.

MOTION by Mr. dePriest, second by Mr. Todd Larson

"Seeing that *Move Central Arkansas* is consistent with both the vision and the financially constrained plan of *Imagine Central Arkansas*, the RPAC recommends that the Metroplan Board of Directors support the quarter-cent sales tax initiative, which is coming up for a vote on the March 1."

Discussion: Mr. Brad Walker asked if it would be better to discuss the topic at this meeting and then vote on support at the February meeting. Mr. Patrick Stair responded that the transit recommendations are already part of the long range plan, and that the improvements have been a topic of discussion for 20-plus years. Ms. Coreen Frasier and Mr. Cummings also agreed that the need to secure an independent funding source has long been acknowledged as vital to transit and to the strategy of *Imagine Central Arkansas*. Mr. Lyford asked if the recommendation would get on the Board's agenda this month. Mr. Jim McKenzie replied that it would be on the agenda for January 27.

PASSED

4. Proposed I-30 Crossing

Mr. Earl Mott, of Garver, presented an update on the I-30 project. The presentation included a [schedule overview](#) and the NEPA schematic timeline. [Access considerations](#) include developing a Cantrell interchange that keeps all existing crossings open and does not impact the River Rail line. [Environmental considerations](#) include community assessments, survey of wetlands and traffic noise, air quality, cultural resources, and an evaluation of park and land impacts.

Two public meetings are scheduled for February. Both are open to the public, although the first, on February 9, will be primarily for the technical review working group. On February 23, a public meeting will be held at Horace Mann Middle School, in Little Rock. The content of the meetings will include refinement of both the eight-lane general purpose and 10-lane collector/distributor (the PEL recommendation) alternatives, traffic modeling of both alternatives, and initiation of the environmental evaluation process for both alternatives.

Mr. Mott's PowerPoint presentation will be made available to the Council via the RPAC website, along with the other material from this meeting.

The Chairman asked for comments and questions from the Council. Following is summary of the ensuing discussion.

Mr. Covington: Metroplan expected to receive the AHTD's request for waiver by now. At this point we have still not received the request, and I am concerned that some of the information being generated in the environmental process and which is needed for considering an amendment, won't be known until far into the process.

Dr. Hampton: So to date there is no request for a waiver of the six-lane requirement?

Mr. Mott: That's right, although a draft has been prepared. There are timing issues involved in sending the request.

Dr. Hampton: I have been thinking for a long time about this in terms of process. I do not believe there are any bad people involved in this process; however, I am struck by the fact that this is the second major highway transportation project where this [delay] has occurred since I moved back to Little Rock. Typically, everything regarding the conceptual design is in place and then there is public comment on what has already been decided. That troubles me, because a civil and respectful discussion cannot really take place when the feedback is that the questions that are being raised about neighborhood values and priorities will interfere with [the Department's] ability to receive massive amounts of money from the federal government. I hope we think about process in a different way, so the visioning of this type of massive project occurs at the community scale before the project is conceptualized. There are larger issues of community - in other words, what kind of community do we want? - that should be blended into the public discussion and integrated into roadway project. this

Mr. Mott: This won't completely address your question, but I do think the public involvement process for this project has been unique . We went to the first meeting with basically a blank sheet of paper and asked people what they wanted to see.

Mr. Cummings: But that is one of the things - once the Council receives the request - that we will have to address. Over a process of many years, this Council has developed a plan that describes exactly what you just said: how we want our community to look, and now we must somehow marry that vision with this waiver request. This Council is charged with overseeing the public process and we must determine the extent and kind of outreach is necessary.

Ms. Carolyn Shearman: I'd like to echo what Sybil said. It feels like most of the public wasn't involved until late fall, when the eight- or 10-lane option was already designed. I-30 bridge needs to be replaced, but there are other options to building multiple lanes, such as following the plan for enhancing our arterial roads. I hope those are things that are still being considered, because those are what will improve our communities.

Ms. Jessie Jones: [With regard to early public involvement] I want to add that the State has just launched the long range transportation plan and we encourage everyone to participate. Through this I-30 process, we are obviously hearing a lot of different things. Changing in the middle of the stream is really difficult. This is your opportunity to shape the trajectory of the long range transportation plan.

Mr. Cummings: Thank you for that information.

Ms. Leesa Freasier: We [ADH] have recognized this inability of communities to be involved in a transportation project until the tail-end of the process. ADH has met with AHTD to discuss the situation and to brainstorm on how to promote early participation in projects, from the very beginning. The ADH and AHTD are working to develop a process where we, as the Health Department with local health units in every county and Hometown Health, and which therefore has the connectivity to go in and work with those communities to understand the process. It's not that the AHTD is holding on to secrets, it's that they have their own way of doing things, and if we are involved we can get the community involved quicker and understand the process educated decisions about what is best for their communities.

Mr. Dan Roda: We are a volunteer board and until recently largely ignored. Now that this I-30 issue has been raised, some of us are having to answer questions posed by family, friends and co-workers. Therefore: (1) When will we get information/request? And (2) is there any basis or substance to the logic that as the bridge is currently designed, with collector-distributor lanes, there is no need for the Department to request a waiver, since it would technically be in compliance with the six-lane cap?

Mr. Mott: As it relates to the actual submission of the request, I'd say within 60 days.

Ms. Jessie Jones: As we've already said, there have scheduling issues, and in the interest of transparency, the Department is reluctant to issue a letter that may have inconsistencies in it. As for the design questions, obviously NEPA will determine the preferred alternative. Everybody in this room has a voice but the process includes everybody, the exception letter will be open, and just ask for an exception without specifically stating what the design will be.

Mr. Roda: I appreciate that clarification. I appreciate that there does appear to be some meeting of the minds.

Mr. Larson: I want the new people on this Council to understand that we do have influence on the policies that are adopted and followed. The policy established by Metroplan has a great deal of history and strategy: increased land use density, robust arterial network, integration of transit. At each plan update. the Board has re-examined and re-adopted this policy as part of the regional strategy. I think they will listen to us again.

Mr. Patrick Stair: AHTD has done a nice job on public meetings, holding numerous meetings, many of them in neighborhoods that are most directly impacted, and at convenient times. I am happy that the AHTD is looking toward a more interactive relationship with the public. However, the AHTD has been a member of TAC/RPAC for 20 or more years, and a member of the Metroplan Board since its inception. During that time, AHTD representatives have been part of the discussion and

strategy for central Arkansas: six-lane interstate build-out; regional arterial network; robust transit. That's 20 years of discussion and a lot of public comment. And now, the AHTD has ignored 90 percent of the vision and goals laid out in those 20 years and most recently reconfirmed in *Imagine Central Arkansas*. My question: will this increased public comment have an impact on the design of this bridge and highway?

Mr. Mott: We continue to hear some things from the public. We have made significant adaptations to the project.

Ms. Kathleen Lambert: Regarding the new document showing design alternatives, will it be available prior to the February meeting?

Mr. Mott: It will be available.

Ms. Lambert: Available prior to the meeting?

Mr. Mott: Probably not. The work load will be prohibitive. However, there will be two week comment period.

Mr. Buckley O'Mell: I have a question about 3rd and 4th Streets. Will the design allow for vehicular access only or open to pedestrians?

Mr. Mott: Full access, vehicles, pedestrians.

Ms. Kay Kelley Arnold: The recommendation from the Little Rock Board of Directors last night to take more time to consider alternative prior to a final vote - how does that affect timeline you've outlined?

Mr. Mott: I don't know.

Ms. Frasier: The City of Little Rock announced at a public meeting that it will hire an urban planner as a consultant in this process. Has the AHTD or consultants thought of also hiring an urban planner?

Mr. Mott: There are urban planners on the consultant team.

Ms. Frasier: And will there be communication between those planners and the City?

Mr. Mott: I expect so.

Ms. Frasier: I think this is one of the most important decisions the Little Rock Board of Directors will make, possibly ever. Kathy Webb said that today, and I agree with her. All of us should be very well educated on this matter.

Mr. Cummings: I agree, Coreen. This is a critical decision for the Little Rock Board. As RPAC representatives, we should be familiar not just with our own plan but the ramifications of this project on the cities. This is hugely important for our next generation. We can't just come to the table and vote yes or no. We must have alternatives to present and explain our vision and reason. We owe the Highway Department that, to give them our view. We do appreciate the Highway Department coming to us today. Thank you.

Mr. McKenzie: When can we expect a draft Environmental Assessment document? I am concerned that some of the information that the RPAC needs, especially with regard to financial constraint, may not be available in a timely manner.

Mr. Mott: Hard to say but guess early summer, possibly June.

Mr. McKenzie: To the extent that we can, we need to get information to this body as quickly as possible, so that we are not pushing decisions at the end of the year.

Mr. Walker: Speaking about information and data, it seems there are now quantitative efforts underway to assess the environmental impacts. Based on the alternatives you've submitted, there has already been a preliminary determination of no significant impact. So what is happening now is further research into specific air and noise. My frustration when I met with the AHTD in North Little Rock last year, was that the parameters are defined in such a way that they don't really inform the public about those noise impacts or air quality. It seems like we have the expertise and raw data to do some of that modeling and made available to the public. How can we get that done and who would we talk to about that?

Mr. Mott: No, The purpose of the PEL process is not to determine environmental impact, and did not do so.. Only until the NEPA process is concluded will we know that. During the PEL process, we took a lot of alternatives and narrowed them down. In this instance we have a couple of alternatives that are going through the NEPA process, and we are looking at those detailed parameters as the relate to noise and air quality, community impacts, and wetlands impacts are all elements that are being considered.

Mr. Walker: But none of those analyses ever contemplated a no-free-flow or transit.

Mr. Mott: The NEPA examination of alternatives does include a no-build option that looks at what would happen if everything stayed the same, without free flow of traffic along the corridor.

Mr. Walker: I don't mean no free-flow in terms of congestion but of signalization, and of redesignating the roadway.

Mr. Mott: Are you referring to a boulevard option, such as has been presented in the press?

Mr. Walker: Yes.

Mr. Mott: That was put together by an outside entity. We are aware of it, and are looking at it. There are some potential ramifications regarding redesignation of an interstate facility, from the Federal Highway Administration.

Mr. McKenzie: There were many alternatives considered in the early phases of this project, but replacing the freeway with a boulevard was not one of them.

Mr. Mott: That is correct.

Mr. Walker: So how do we go about getting that information? How can we determine if this is a viable option?

Mr. Mott: I can't speculate on that.

Mr. Walker: I wrote to you in November and called your attention to the boulevard plan, which has percolated upward. You have the resources and I hope the Highway Department would explore and make those data available.

Mr. Tom Sutton: Are data available for the purpose and needs study? Was there an option for a 6 lane alternative?

Mr. Mott: The option of a modified six-lane alternative was studied. It took into account some improvements/modification to the lanes, shoulders and access, that sort of thing. The analysis was done mostly at a qualitative level. Based on demographics for growth and the purpose and need, that alternative was screened out in Level 2 of the process.

Mr. Sutton: Screened out, from what perspective?

Mr. Mott: From mobility perspective, and from traffic maintenance during construction.

Mr. Sutton: Where can I find the data for that alternative?

Mr. Mott: Analysis for the modified six-lane alternative is contained included in the PEL document, available online.

With that, the Chairman asked Ms. Susan Dollar to go over the next item on the agenda.

5. Public Participation Plan (PPP)

As a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), Metroplan is required to prepare and adopt a PPP. The first PPP was developed in 2008, and was updated in 2011; both received input and guidance from the RPAC (formerly the TAC). The PPP is due for a fairly significant update this year.

Ms. Dollar explained that reviewing and commenting on the PPP was not part of the RPAC's original charge. The PPP came to be a task item for the RPAC for two reasons: (1) much of the PPP overlaps with areas that are part of the RPAC's oversight; and, (2) the PPP must be developed in consultation with all interested parties, plus the general public, and the Council is ideally suited to fill that role.

The PPP must include the following elements:

- developed in consultation with all interested parties and the general public
- in place prior to adoption of plans and Transportation Improvement Programs (TIPs)
- stand-alone document
- description of visualization techniques used to engage the public for plans, TIPs, and other key documents
- provisions for public meetings that are convenient and accessible
- provisions for publishing plans and TIPs
- availability in electronic format

The timeframe for the PPP update is as follows:

- draft PPP will be available for RPAC review and comment in February
- the Metroplan Board will approve the draft for a 45-day public comment period
- the Board will adopt the PPP in April, contingent upon public comment

6. Other Business and Next Meeting

Two items were brought forward: (1) information needed regarding the I-30 Crossing proposal; and (2) date for the next meeting.

Information needed regarding I-30 Crossing proposal. Mr. Cummings noted that within a few short weeks the Council will be asked to make what is likely the most important recommendation of its existence. He asked the Council what information they need in order to better inform their decision. Following are the responses.

Mr. Roda: I will need the text of the request itself. Also, I want to see renderings from street perspective, other design particulars.

Mr. Walker: I would like to study where the traffic is being displaced.

Mr. Jonathan Lupton: look at AHTD website for a small rendering; also, modeling might be done with different scenarios.

Mr. Covington: Yes, that may be possible.

Ms. Amy Whitehead: I have been following this project from the beginning. Where can I share questions with staff?

Mr. Cummings: We need to consider the "What ifs? What are the impacts?" of the proposed project.

Ms. Freasier: I am confused. Why are we even hearing this plan? Lots of time/effort went into this regional plan, *Imagine Central Arkansas*, and it's being ignored.

Dr. Hampton: There is a tension between powerful entities and the emerging new way of conducting public engagement.

Mr. Covington: I agree, Dr. Hampton. That aspect also concerns me.

Mr. Lyford: It would be helpful to see a schedule of the AHTD timeline and compare it with those of the Metroplan Board and RPAC schedules.

Responding to several comments and requests, **Mr. Covington** said that at the next meeting, he will go over the history of some of the policies that are being discussed, e.g., 6-lane.

Mr. Sutton: A decision is little more than 60 days away and I need a lot of information. I think this project could set central Arkansas back by 40 years or more.

Ms. Shearman: I am interested in the new bottlenecks that would be created, and the downstream implications.

Next meeting. The next regularly scheduled meeting is set for Wednesday, February 17, 2016. Confirmation, preliminary agenda and related material will be emailed to the Council prior to the meeting.

No other business was brought forward.

7. Adjourn

With no further business brought forward, the Chairman declared the Council adjourned at 1:33 PM.