

Memorandum

To: Chair and Commissioners

Date: November 21, 2002

From: Diane C. Eidam

File:
Reference Number 1.8
Information

Ref.: RURAL COUNTIES TASK FORCE SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT

For the past fourteen years, the Commission has sponsored the Rural Counties Task Force for the purpose of highlighting rural transportation issues. Celia McAdam, Chair of the Task Force, will provide a briefing on this item regarding the recent activities and accomplishments of the Task Force.

Attachment

RURAL COUNTIES TASK FORCE

Semi Annual Report

December 2002

The Rural Counties Task Force (RCTF) was formed in 1988 as a joint effort between the California Transportation Commission and the 28 rural county Regional Transportation Planning Agencies (RTPAs) and Local Transportation Commissions (CTCs). The purpose of the Task Force is to provide a direct opportunity for the smallest counties of California to remain informed, have a voice, and help shape statewide transportation policies and programs.

The Task Force is an informal organization with no budget or staff. Meetings are held on the third Friday of odd numbered months at the Caltrans Headquarters facility. Kathie Jacobs of the CTC staff acts as liaison to the Task Force, and CTC and Caltrans staff typically attend these meetings to present information or engage in discussions regarding statewide transportation issues that interest and affect rural counties.

The implementation of SB 45 in 1997 significantly increased the responsibilities on transportation planning agencies. The effects were particularly pronounced in the smallest agencies, where modest staffs were now responsible for project specific planning, programming, and monitoring. These changes also intensified the value and purpose of the Task Force.

The past year has been a challenging one, and not just for rural agencies. Like our urban counterparts, much of our efforts have focused on making the hard decisions and compromises necessary to submit RTIP amended to deal with the limited programming capacity in the STIP. The CTC has had similar challenges in responding to state and regional needs in adopting the 2002 State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). Availability of funding will continue to engage California's transportation planners and programmers through 2003 and beyond.

Those efforts have greatly focused the list of challenges and accomplishments that have involved Task Force members in 2002, as well as the issues that will continue to confront Task Force members in the future.

ISSUES and CHALLENGES

Project Delivery

By giving local agencies both the ability to select RTIP projects and responsibility for schedule and budget, SB 45 requires a fundamental change in the relationship between local agencies and Caltrans. The enormity of that shift and all its implications are only now truly being realized.

There is a learning curve for both Caltrans and rural agencies in these redefined roles. The new guidelines and directives provided by Caltrans management often take significant amounts of time to filter down to the line staff, resulting in conflicting information. By the same token,

locals are not always aware of the intricacies of certain types of regulations governing STIP funded projects.

There needs to be a full and equal partnership between both parties to ensure better communication, as well as better understanding of who is doing what and how much it's going to cost. These are critical to moving projects forward in as expeditious and cost effective manner as possible.

Moreover, there needs to be financial information in place to ensure that the project sponsors understands how and where the budget they are responsible for managing is being spent. Without financial reporting systems that allow locals to access project financial information, budget responsibility will continue to be a problem for local agencies.

Efforts

The Rural Counties Task Force have discussed these concerns with top Caltrans management, including Chief Deputy Director Tony Harris, Chief Engineer Brent Felker, and Chief of Project Management Carl Haack. They have been very receptive and interested in working together to improve communications.

The Task Force is currently working with Mr. Haack and his staff to set up an interactive workshop for RCTF members and Caltrans districts project managers to discuss and urge the use of project charters. These charters are an agreement between Caltrans districts and the local agency to outline the responsibilities, timelines, and costs for STIP or SHOPP funded state highway projects. The workshop is expected to be held in February or March.

The AB 1012 Management Information Systems Steering Committee, which includes RCTF representation, was charged with developing the computer systems needed to provide project accounting information. It has not met for over a year, in part due to the state's budget woes making new investment in computer systems unlikely in the near future.

Continuing Issues

- The AB 1012 MIS Steering Committee needs to be reestablished to continue the important work of providing ongoing project accounting information to project managers.

Environmental Streamlining for Federal Regulations

Federal environmental regulation compliance continues to be one of the greatest challenges to on-time, on-budget project delivery. While an issue throughout California, it is a particularly daunting challenge for rural areas; rural areas are planning some of the most significant bypass projects in the state, including the Willits Bypass, Prunedale Bypass, Lincoln Bypass, and Angels Camp Bypass, which bring up significant environmental issues.

The problem is, this is a process we have little or no control over. Direction and level of detail agreed to earlier in the process is often changed midstream; consultations that should take a matter of weeks can often take months or years; even obtaining information on what the hold up is, at best, difficult. We are more than willing to negotiate mitigations that are fair and equitable, but the process, as it is currently implemented, negates progress.

Our frustrations with the Federal Highway Administration and other federal regulatory agencies are shared throughout California, by Caltrans and our urban counterparts. For those reasons, federal streamlining has been included in the California Consensus Principles for TEA-21 Reauthorization.

Efforts

The Rural County Task Force has pledged to assist in whatever way possible to improve the timelines for Federal approvals for major transportation projects. We support the efforts to integrate CEQA and NEPA, and to streamline environmental review under the TEA-21 Reauthorization.

Meanwhile, RCTF members served on the Caltrans Small Project Streamlining Committee, designed to find ways to move small transportation projects forward in an expeditious manner.

Continuing Issues

- Timelines for wending through the Federal process simply cannot be accurately predicted, and it is almost entirely out of the control of the sponsoring agency. Rural counties ask that the CTC be aware of and sympathetic to these facts in dealing with timely use of funds issues.

Project Funding Sources

Clearly, existing resources are not sufficient to make the capital improvements needed to provide effective transportation systems in rural areas. These transportation improvements are identified in the local Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs), which must provide a “financially realistic” project list. More and more counties find themselves unable to reconcile their project needs with their realistic funding expectations over the 20 year life of the plan.

Efforts

About half of the counties represented by the Task Force have expressed interest or have taken steps to pursue the approach taken by many urban areas: a local sales tax for transportation.

While many rural counties could meet a 50% majority threshold, few - if any - could meet the currently required 2/3 majority. This was borne out by the recent election, where five counties had sales tax measures on the ballot. All of the counties - including rural Madera County - received more than 50% in favor of the tax. However, only Riverside County was able to muster the 67% required for passage.

Lake County is planning to put a sales tax measure on the March 2003 ballot to fund road rehabilitation. They will need a 2/3 majority for passage.

Continuing Issues

- Rural counties join our urban counterparts to ease the voting threshold to enact a local sales tax for transportation purposes, to enable us to develop additional sources of funding for needed transportation projects.

Quality Assurance/Project Oversight

As owner and operator of the state highway system, Caltrans has a responsibility to ensure that any work done on its highways meets its rigorous standards. Since the 1980's, Self Help Counties have received Caltrans' quality assurance and project oversight for state highway projects funded by local sales tax measures. Legislation passed in 1989 directed those costs to be funded by an "off the top" allocation of STIP funds.

The passage of Proposition 35 now allows all project sponsors to contract out STIP and SHOPP funded work on state highways. Unfortunately, the oversight for these projects is not included in the same "off the top" funding. Caltrans has therefore proposed guidelines for Quality Assurance, which would charge each project 10% of the budgeted amount.

Efforts

The Rural Counties Task Force, along with the RTPA Group, has been working with Caltrans to obtain more information about exactly what activities this charge would go for, how it would be applied, and whether it is an appropriate and equitable amount for all projects. After extensive discussion, some principles have been developed to address the needs of each party. A Quality Assurance Committee has now been established as an ongoing committee to monitor oversight costs and procedures and deal with issues or conflicts that may arise.

While rural counties do not receive the benefits afforded Self Help Counties for project oversight, we are heartened by the principle that Caltrans agrees that the Quality Assurance and Oversight efforts would be expedited for those projects who chose to contract out.

Continuing Issues

- We will need to work with Caltrans and project sponsors to minimize project oversight costs and ensure good accounting information.

Local Road Rehabilitation and Maintenance Funding

The State's smallest counties generally have proportionately higher miles of roadways with the fewest resources to maintain them. The CTC recognized this need when, in 1998, the Commission opened the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) to local road rehabilitation projects. Many of these projects were added, including those in rural areas, even though rehabilitation projects do not fit well with the intent or mechanics of the STIP. The Task Force acknowledges and appreciates the Commission's efforts to widen the description of rehabilitation project and work with rural counties to make these projects fit better into the STIP.

The passage of Proposition 42, combined with the Governor's Traffic Congestion Relief Program (TCRP), has provided a new source of funding for road rehabilitation. Unfortunately, declining revenues to the city and county apportionments from these programs will take us even further from meeting the identified needs.

Efforts

The Task Force has continuously focused on reducing the \$1 billion backlog of rehab projects that would bring county roads up to "good" condition, as well as providing a dedicated funding source for the \$50 million needed annually to maintain those roads in good condition.

Rural counties are concerned that the passage of Proposition 42 would lead people to think the road rehab issue has been resolved. Task Force members have been working with the legislature on proposals to assure the place of road rehabilitation in future funding cycles, and help address the ongoing backlog.

Continuing Issues

- Until a sufficient, dedicated funding source is found **and** the backlog is eliminated, small rural counties continue to need the option of using STIP funds for road rehabilitation.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Rural Counties Task Force Conference

The first annual Rural Counties Task Force Conference was held in conjunction with the CalACT Fall Conference on October 16-18 in Lake County, and what a success it was! RCTF sponsored six sessions, each of which attracted a full room of participants - some with standing room only. Sessions included such topics as how local assistance works, environmental streamlining, changes to the Transportation Development Act, legislative issues, and Overall Work Programs. The project delivery session was a highlight, and brought rural agencies, private consultants, and high level Caltrans staff together to discuss how we can deliver projects more quickly.

We were pleased to see the strong support of Caltrans, as evidenced by the attendance of numerous district and headquarters staff. It was particularly gratifying to attract Caltrans Chief Deputy Director Tony Harris as our keynote speaker on Thursday evening, and certainly appreciate his participation.

Our second annual RCTF Conference will be held in Squaw Valley in October 2003.

Communication Improvements with Caltrans

Caltrans is a complex agency. There are districts, headquarters, plus all kinds of divisions and functions that encompass more than 20,000 people. Even the largest rural transportation agencies have less than 10 people. Clearly, it's a communications challenge.

An ongoing effort of the Rural Counties Task Force is to improve communication with all levels of Caltrans staff. By understanding the priorities and constraints of the other, we can all be more effective in delivering the projects the traveling public needs.

Some of those efforts seemed to coalesce at the RCTF Conference, in an improved level of understanding with high level Caltrans staff. We achieved a better understanding of the constraints inherent in a large organization, and the regulations Caltrans is subject to, while they learned some of the steep learning curves and financial and political challenges that locals face.

It turns out, we're not nearly as far apart as we might have thought. Most importantly, there was a strong and sincere commitment to maintaining the lines of communication.

In that spirit, the RCTF and Caltrans will be holding a workshop with the districts and line staff that interact with rural agencies on a daily basis to communicate some of the understandings and directives. Bringing district project managers into the discussion, with all parties involved in the discussion, should solidify some of these efforts.

Streamlining Products

Two efforts have been ongoing to demystify the process for dealing with the requirements of Federal funding. This is particularly important for small rural areas, where staff wear too many hats to be masters of Federal funding intricacies.

One effort, the Small Project Streamlining Committee, was headed by Terry Abbott and his Headquarters Local Assistance staff, and included Rural County Task Force participation. The Committee produced a number of documents that were sent out to every regional agency and public works director in the state as resources to simplify the Federal process. One document provided a 20 page distillation of the two-volume Local Assistance Manual for simple projects; another lists ideas and resources that have helped local agencies improve project delivery; another provides a template for project Work Plans.

Another effort, known as the Local Agency Manual for Processing Projects (LAMPP), was sponsored and funded by the Calaveras Council of Governments, Amador County Transportation Commission, and Alpine County Transportation Commission. This takes the distilled Local Assistance Manual concept a step further, by providing an interactive computer program that focuses on the tasks that need to be done by the project sponsor to get a Federally funded project built. One of the key features of this program is that it provides links to the specific forms required by the step you're at, and how to fill it out correctly. When you consider that there are hundreds of forms that are potentially needed in a Federal project, the benefit of this feature is even more significant.

State Level Committee Participation

In addition to those issues and efforts listed above, various Task Force members are also providing a rural perspective to the following efforts. Many of these efforts involve participation on committees established by Caltrans.

- TEA-21 Federal Reauthorization Steering Committee
- FTA 5310, Welfare to Work Advisory Committee, Rural Transit Issues
- Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS)
- Small Project Streamlining Committee
- Caltrans, City, County, Federal Highway Administration Coordinating Group
- Context Sensitive Solutions Committee
- Quality Assurance/Oversight Committee
- Transportation for Economic Development Advisory Committee
- AB1012 MIS Implementation Steering Committee

- California Transportation Investment Strategy (CTIS)

Members of the Task Force also actively coordinate with other statewide groups to share information and perspective on transportation issues. These other groups include:

- Regional Transportation Planning Agency (RTPA) Group
- California Association of Councils of Government (CALCOG)
- Regional-Caltrans Coordinating Group
- Regional Council of Rural Counties (RCRC)