

Capital Area Regional Transportation Planning Organization Quarterly Meeting Summary Minutes

CAPCO Regional Training Academy Friday, January 12, 2001

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Maurice Pitts Jr.; Commissioner, Lee County
Eric W. Carlson; Mayor, City of Elgin
Martin McLean; Judge, Burnet County
H.T. Wright; Judge, Caldwell County
Robert J. Wood; City Manager, City of Flatonia
Jim Dunaway; City Manager, City of Elgin
Alison Schulze; Principal Planner, CAMPO
LeRoy Clich; Travis County Transportation and Natural Resources
Ed Collins; Urban Transportation Administrator, TXDOT – Austin District
Robert Stuard; TXDOT
Clovia English; City Manager, City of Lockhart
Ray Sanders; Mayor, City of Lockhart
Coby Chase; TXDOT Legislative Affairs
Don Loucks; Commissioner, Bastrop County
W.Grey White; City Administrator, City of Buda
Steve Jones; City Manager, City of Pflugerville
Ross Milloy; Austin-San Antonio Corridor Council
Betty Voights; Executive Director, CAPCO
Richard Kelly; Director of Regional Planning and Information, CAPCO
Kelly Lindell; Administrative Assistant, CAPCO

I. CALL TO ORDER – Chairman George Byars, Blanco County Judge

II. PRESENTATION ON REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION AND RELATED LEGISLATION –
Ross Milloy, President of the Austin-San Antonio Corridor Council

Mr. Milloy began his presentation by outlining some of the challenges that the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has faced in meeting the State's transportation needs. He pointed out that the agency needs more personnel, better training, and higher-paying salaries in order to compete in the market place. He also stated that TEA-21, which ends in 2003, has helped to funnel more money to the states for transportation, but that we need to be prepared as a region by 2002 so that we can do significantly better under the authorization of TEA-22.

He then discussed TX-21, which is a loosely-knit group of constituencies across the state that has been meeting over the last year to try to address agreed-upon transportation funding needs. The Austin, Dallas, Houston, and Border regions have come up with several generic ideas about what issues the Legislature needs to address during this session. Members were provided with a handout of the top five funding issues that TX-21 has agreed upon.

Mr. Milloy then elaborated on the first item, which discussed the desire to put money related to and collected from transportation back into transportation projects, rather than put into the general fund where it is used for other purposes. He also discussed the last item on the list regarding overweight truck penalties. Currently, the penalty is only \$100 for an overweight truck, but the impact that these trucks have on county roads is much more substantial.

All top five items together would create an additional \$500 million in revenues for transportation in Texas, but Mr. Milloy indicated that this is still not enough. He mentioned that the Corridor Council is backing Judge Jackson's idea of taking a \$500 million bond to raise a fund of about \$5 billion to address the big-ticket transportation items.

Mr. Milloy then briefly discussed a bill passed during the last legislative session that allowed the creation of a Commuter Rail District between Austin and San Antonio. He stated that some of the counties and cities in between Austin and San Antonio fear that they will have to contribute funds to the project. In response to these fears, the Corridor Council is considering asking Senators Barrientos and Wentworth to remove the counties from the legislation, and to just allow the cities along the route, or each city in which there would be a station, to participate in the formation of the District.

He closed by stating that for TEA-22, the region needs to begin identifying critical projects that fit into an integrated network, and that over the next year, the Council will be talking to counties about their critical needs.

III. Presentation on State and Federal Transportation Legislation Issues – Coby Chase, Director of State and Federal Relations, TxDOT

Mr. Chase distributed a handout describing the Texas Transportation Commission's legislative priorities. He informed CARTPO members that the handout included some of the legislative priorities expressed by Governor Perry, Commissioner Johnson, and the House Transportation Committee. It also included some of the important issues identified in the State Senate Affairs Committee's Interim Study on Transportation Planning and Financing, as well as the Senate Intergovernmental Affairs Committee's study related to transportation planning.

Mr. Chase mentioned that the Comptroller would soon be announcing the results of TxDOT's performance review, and that some good recommendations would come from this. He said that many leaders are coming to the table to make transportation recommendations, and more advocacy groups are focusing on promoting statewide transportation goals. He then passed out a related document that listed various advocacy groups and their goals, and mentioned that a majority of these groups, though still focusing on their own individual interests, have begun to understand the need for a generally healthy overall transportation system.

Mr. Chase then referred back to the legislative priority handout, and highlighted the following key issues:

1. The issuance of bonds for constructing highways – Texas has traditionally used a “pay as-you-go” method of financing, which is generally the best way to fund the vast majority of projects. However, under some circumstances, it might behoove us to move larger projects along faster with some sort of debt financing. The two debt financing options would be to either issue Grant Anticipation Revenue Vehicle (GARVEE) bonds, in which future federal funding is committed to pay off bonds, or to establish a new dedicated source of funding in the State Highway Fund,

which could be set aside in an account to repay the debt on bonds issued to construct highways. Mr. Chase said that the appeal of the latter option would be that it involves new money. This idea seems to have more people coalescing around it than the idea of issuing GARVEEs.

2. State equity in toll roads – The Texas Constitution prevents us from giving money to our own Turnpike Division to build a toll road. The best we can do is to provide TTA with a loan. Commissioner Nichols came up with a different concept that is gaining some momentum in the House and the Senate: provide for the use of State Highway funds to be leveraged into a larger amount of money. This would require a constitutional amendment that would allow us to grant money to our Turnpike Authority Division.
3. Design-Build – Some larger transportation projects could move along more quickly using a design-build form of development, where design and construction are done in parallel. Many local governments and the private sector have been doing this for a while, particularly with vertical construction. Several state DOT's are also starting to get into this type of development. Design-build requires more up-front costs, but its projects should be delivered faster. We are currently prevented from doing this by state law.
4. Abandoned Rail –TxDOT has the legal responsibility for statewide rail planning, and has taken the approach that the more things we can get on rail, the less we will have on roads. There is a compelling transportation case to keep some of these lines open. This session, TxDOT will ask for \$10 million over the biennium to acquire rail and lease it out to short line operators, particularly those in agricultural communities. TxDOT does not want to become rail operators. Mr. Chase referred to the State of Oklahoma, which has an interesting rail plan that we can look to as an example.
5. Prohibiting 2060 permittees from crossing load-zoned bridges – 2060 is a bill that was passed a number of years ago that allows overweight trucks to pay a very low fee for traveling over load-zoned roads and bridges. Two Senators and one House member may be ready to propose legislation that would prohibit overweight trucks from driving over these bridges. Exceptions will be made for some land-locked areas where there is no other way to get in and out, but the number of these areas is very limited.

Commissioner Pitts, from Lee County, voiced his concerns about the safety problems associated with allowing overweight trucks to cross the county bridges. He mentioned that he was worried about the safety of school buses that are crossing the same bridges that 2060 permitted trucks are crossing. He also stated that he does not think counties should be liable for something that the State is permitting drivers to do.

6. State Infrastructure Bank Loans – This is a unique program out of federal law that allows cities and counties to borrow money at lower-than-market rates to be used for local matches. Currently, a county must go into debt before it can borrow money from the State Infrastructure Bank. The Commissioners are seeking legislation to change this.
7. Defining statewide transportation priorities - Commissioner Johnson and Governor Perry have appointed a task force to look at how to define transportation priorities throughout the state. This task force would be looking at a different way to present transportation to TxDOT, and will directly influence our transportation planning in Texas.

Mr. Chase wrapped up his presentation by re-emphasizing that statewide priorities would focus on flexibility in planning and streamlining the process.

Judge Wright, from Caldwell County, voiced his concerns and uncertainty about how to convince voters to float a bond issue to acquire right-of-way for a NAFTA-driven highway when the county cannot afford to maintain the roads it has. Mr. Chase recognized this concern, and said that he did not have a good answer to the problem at this time.

After Mr. Chase's presentation, Ms. Voights stated that this organization (CARTPO) was initially envisioned as an RPO. However, Judge Biscoe, of Travis County, wondered why the organization should be limited only to rural areas. He suggested that it be called a "Regional Transportation Planning Organization" that would cover the entire region, including those counties covered by the MPO. Ms. Voights added that the MPO covers only Travis County and portions of Hays and Williamson Counties, and that other counties in our region have very real planning needs. She asked Mr. Chase about when we might reasonably hope to receive some funding to help us conduct transportation planning in these areas. Mr. Chase stated that he does not have the answer to that question yet. Ms. Voights then suggested that this issue might be addressed again at a later session.

IV. TXDOT PUBLIC HEARING ON TEXAS TRUNK SYSTEM UPGRADES

Ed Collins, representing the TxDOT-Austin District, distributed a handout and announced that there would be a public meeting on January 23, 2001 at the Main Highway Department Building on 11th and Brazos to present some of the proposed changes that TxDOT is considering for the Texas Trunk System. The Trunk System is a relatively new program that will primarily convert two-lane roadways and four-lane undivided highways into a divided road system. The upcoming meeting will serve as a forum for members of the public to examine and provide input on proposed additions to the System, particularly on US 281 in Blanco and Burnet Counties. He invited CARTPO members to share their comments and to attend the meeting on the 23rd.

V. TXDOT PUBLIC HEARING ON THE FY 2002-2004 TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM (TIP)

Mr. Collins distributed another handout that provided information about the FY 2002-2004 TIP. He mentioned that TxDOT held public hearings in 1999 in Bastrop and Burnet to discuss the TIP projects. TxDOT is still seeking comments about the projects listed on the handout, in addition to suggestions for upcoming meeting locations.

IV. Other Business

Ms. Voights asked that everyone please introduce himself or herself to the other CARTPO members. She then briefly discussed what CARTPO is and how it came about. She stated that she would like for the organization to keep evolving, and that she would like to open its membership up. She then entertained suggestions for the next meeting's discussion topics, and mentioned that she would invite TxDOT representatives back to answer some of the members' questions. She said that CARTPO would probably meet again in late March or early April, which would allow some time to see legislative activity. She also mentioned that there might be occasion for members to attend some of the hearings, and that if she sees any bills that might be good for our region, she would go ahead and call an early meeting.

V. Adjourn