



Date: January 5, 2004
From: Rob Zako, Transportation Advocate
To: Metropolitan Policy Committee
Cc: Transportation Planning Committee
Citizen Advisory Committee
Re: Looking Back, Looking Forward

(Below we expand on the remarks I made at your special meeting on December 30, 2004.)

Dear members of the Metropolitan Policy Committee (MPC),

The end of the year is a good time to look at where MPC has been and where it might be headed.

The roots of MPC go back as far as 1945, when six member governments formed the Central Lane County Planning Commission. The name was later changed to the Central Lane Planning Council.

In 1971, the name was changed again to the Lane Council of Governments (LCOG). Today, LCOG serves 26 member governments and agencies, coordinating their activities and providing high quality services throughout Lane County. Member governments support LCOG and govern it through a Board of Directors, which consists of representatives from the member governments.

In 1973, the Governor of Oregon designated LCOG as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the Eugene-Springfield metropolitan area for the purposes of meeting federal transportation planning requirements.

In 1987, MPC was established by a joint resolution of Eugene, Springfield and Lane County, who then as now were partners in the Eugene-Springfield Metro Plan. Member jurisdictions *appoint* representatives to MPC.

MPC is often referred to as an *advisory* dispute resolution body. Indeed, as recently as 2001, members of MPC negotiated in good faith to resolve differences over the adoption of TransPlan. But MPC itself did not have the power to adopt TranPlan. MPC's recommendations went back to Eugene, Springfield, Lane County and Lane Transit District (LTD) for approval and each jurisdiction retained its independent authority to adopt or reject TransPlan.

But MPC has always had some independent decision making *authority*. The Lane Council of Governments (LCOG) delegated to MPC some MPO responsibilities, which had previously been delegated to the earlier Metropolitan Area Transportation Committee (MATC). These responsibilities included the adoption the Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Program (MTIP). LCOG retained other MPO responsibilities, including the "endorsement of the transportation plan and annual amendments and for adoption of the work program governing the transportation planning process." In any case transportation planning was much simpler during the early years of MPC.

Following the 2000 Census, which indicated a population of 224,049 in the metropolitan area, LCOG's designation as an MPO changed. By federal regulation, MPOs over 200,000 are classified as Transportation Management Areas (TMAs). With this designation came LCOG's increased transportation planning responsibilities related to congestion management, project selection, and certification, as well as increased discretion over federal transportation funds.

As the LCOG Board of Directors consists of 26 elected officials from member governments and agencies mostly outside the metropolitan area, it became clear that it would be better for the LCOG Board to delegate the MPO responsibilities it had retained to officials more in touch with metropolitan transportation issues.

Thus in October 2002, the LCOG Board of Directors approved resolution 2002-08 delegating all MPO responsibilities to MPC. In February 2003, MPC accepted all MPO responsibilities from LCOG. With this delegation and with the transition to a Transportation Management Area, the authority of MPC increased greatly—a change that still isn't fully appreciated.

But old habits die hard. As recently as your last meeting, an elected official referred to MPC as a “dispute resolution body,” even as MPC had just independently approved the regional transportation plan and was in the process of allocating tens of millions of dollars to transportation projects.

The reality today is that MPC is an increasingly powerful *decision making body* made up of representatives *appointed* from various jurisdictions. Moreover, these representatives are apparently not bound to act according to the wishes of the jurisdictions they represent. As MPC isn't elected directly by voters, there is a risk that the label “shadow government” might stick.

Some of you perhaps aren't aware of how severely your actions over the last month or two have damaged your credibility. It may take a long time for MPC to repair that damage and to regain the trust and respect of the metropolitan area it is charged to represent.

But we are cautiously hopeful that, with a good faith effort on your part, you can fulfill an important need in our community. Increasingly, the problems we face aren't confined within city limits but rather encompass the Eugene-Springfield-Coburg metropolitan area and extend throughout the larger Region 2050 area. The housing policy in Eugene affects cities from Veneta to Harrisburg to Cottage Grove. The employment policies of Springfield affect Eugene. And transportation decisions affect the whole region.

Today, MPC has many different roles. It is a dispute resolution body, a forum for coordinating activities, the MPO policy board that approves transportation plans and programs, and more. Perhaps most importantly, it is a group of officials from around the metropolitan area that gather monthly to talk about important issues facing the area.

If MPC is to succeed—and we hope it does—here are twelve suggestions for 2005, sort of our “Twelve Days of Christmas” gift to you:

1. **Think regionally.** MPC was originally formed to address regional concerns. A primary purpose of LCOG—like most councils of government—is to support cooperation amongst local governments and a regional approach to problem solving. At the recent Regional Planning and Business Symposium in Portland, Frank Beal, the executive director of Chicago Metropolis 2020, urged leaders to “leave their self-interests at the door and bring in their civic interests” when talking about regional visions and planning. When serving on MPC, strive to look beyond the narrower interests of Eugene, Springfield, Coburg, Lane County,

LTD or ODOT to advance the broader interests of the Central Lane region. The region will succeed when its members fight amongst themselves less and work together more for the benefit of all.

2. **Display a map.** What is this thing called “Central Lane”? Are you a citizen of “Central Lane”? To help give meaning to the idea of the region, and to help you and the public to better visualize the decisions you are making, start displaying a map of the region prominently at each meeting. Do so even if no map is part of your packet. When a member of MPC or staff is making a point, get in the habit of walking up to the map to show everyone what you are talking about. Seeing things visually in a map will help everyone understand better how the pieces of the region fit together.
3. **Explain yourself.** Make sure you understand what you are deciding and why before taking action. When you open a public comment period, explain what the issues are and what kinds of comments from the public would be helpful. Before you take final action, reflect back to the public what you heard from them and why you settled on the decision you did. It’s not sufficient for you to say you heard the public but disagree. You need to respond to the public and explain how you are addressing their concerns or how other concerns outweigh theirs. And don’t let staff speak for you but speak yourselves directly to the public.
4. **Slow down.** Allow yourself and the public adequate time before making decisions. Before making an important decision—a decision to amend a transportation plan or to allocate money—make sure to schedule a public hearing at least two weeks in advance and allow time after the public hearing to submit and digest written materials. If new information is presented (such as the December 22 memo re the I-5/Beltline project), allow adequate time for you and the public to digest the information—even if it means postponing final action.
5. **Serve the public.** Your role is to serve the public, not the other way around. Consider changing your regular meeting time from the middle of the working day to the evening when more people could attend. Never again cut public comments short except in extraordinary circumstances. If the public is interested in what you do—something you should welcome—schedule additional meetings to accommodate the public you serve.
6. **See the forest through the trees.** Let’s face it: Transportation planning is incredibly complex. I do this stuff full time now and am supposed to be an expert, and I continue to learn brand new things about transportation planning. It is easy to get lost in the details and let staff worry about it. But it is critically important for you to rise above all the technical details and to understand what the key issues are and what policy choices you have. Insist that staff help you—and the public—understand the key choices.
7. **Take time to step back.** Since LCOG delegated all its MPO responsibilities to MPC, you have been very busy. Perhaps it seems like you are always behind just trying to do what the Feds require you to do. It is important to realize that your purpose isn’t merely to satisfy federal requirements. The federal transportation planning requirements—like the state requirements—are intended to help and guide you to make critical decisions for the benefit of the region. If you find yourself doing things just because they are required, then you are missing the boat. Direct staff to schedule open discussion time not tied to a particular requirement, during which you can discuss the challenges—transportation and otherwise—facing the region. Do this even if it requires scheduling more meetings. You should do so not only for yourselves, but also for the benefit of the public.

8. **Strive to act by consensus.** Often it isn't so much what you decide but how you decide it. Initially, ODOT faced a lot of opposition to the I-5/Beltline project. To their credit, they stepped back, formed a stakeholder working group and a decision team, and took the time to build consensus around a decision. While some might think that that process took too long, the result is that there is far more support and less controversy around the I-5/Beltline project than around, say, the West Eugene Parkway. You will often save yourself lots of time in the long run by taking adequate time in the short run.
9. **Benefit from your new Citizen Advisory Committee.** Frankly, there is a good chance that the new Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) won't be much help. Either the citizens will get frustrated by the complexity and won't have the time and energy to wade through all the issues, or you will not appreciate or heed the advice they give you. But we hope that both you and the CAC try your best to help each other. For your part, you would do well to give the CAC a fair degree of autonomy. If you confine them too much, they will get lost in narrow details, as so often all of us have. They need to have the freedom to look at the big picture of transportation planning and to understand it in their own way. Of course, they are merely an advisory body and you will not always heed their advice. But we hope that you will welcome and respect their advice. (In particular, Commissioner Green, as you know so much about these transportation issues, there is a danger that you will overwhelm the CAC in your role as liaison. Please don't. Hold back and be there as a resource, talking less and listening more.)
10. **Public involvement begins at home.** Too often members of MPC or staff say there has been adequate public involvement because the materials were available and there was a public hearing. Wrong! Try this experiment: Take the materials for a recent decision—say the UPWP or the MTIP—and give it to your 8th grade son or daughter. See if it makes sense to them. If it doesn't, then you have already failed. As a rule of thumb, assume that the average interested citizen understands complex issues at the 8th grade level. Most of the materials produced by staff fail this simple “8th grade” test. Insist that staff does better, and enlist the help of the CAC in this effort. Note that back in 1999, LCOG worked with some business and citizen groups to develop a tabloid insert that explained TransPlan to the general public. That insert was a great resource for the public. We need more of that.
11. **Educate yourselves and the public.** In cooperation with the CAC, consider more educational events. The occasional public forums are a good start, but these are run by staff. MPC and CAC should consider holding educational forums for the public, with the support of staff, not only before important decisions but also as part of an ongoing series of educational events. And don't underestimate the importance of members of the MPC taking the time to show up, talk with the public, and listen to their concerns and confusion in a less formal setting than a regular MPC meeting.
12. **Urge Lane County to act more like an ACT.** Two years ago, MPC took steps to act more like an Area Commission on Transportation (ACT). But MPC isn't the ACT; it's the MPO. The decision to form a Citizen Advisory Committee is a good approach to better fulfilling *federal* requirements for public involvement. But the issue of how Lane County can better fulfill *state* requirements for public involvement and decision making remains unaddressed. The issue should be of concern to MPC, as Commissioner Papé has explained: The Oregon Transportation Commission won't punitively punish Lane County for not acting more like an ACT, but Lane County is punishing itself because its substandard public involvement and decision making process results in projects that aren't as ready to go as in other areas.

Lastly, we want to wish you all a very happy New Year!

Sincerely,

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P.S. The brief history presented above draws from suggestions from George Kloeppe and the following sources:

- MPC Bylaws, <http://www.lcog.org/meetings/mpc/MPCBylawsAdopted.pdf>
- LCOG Charter, <http://www.lcog.org/about/charter.html>
- LCOG Bylaws, <http://www.lcog.org/about/bylaws.html>
- LCOG 2002 Annual Report, <http://www.lcog.org/2002ar/default.htm>

We apologize in advance for any minor inaccuracies in this history.