

Rural Counties Task Force Annual Report

The Rural Counties Task Force 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 in 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. A member of the CTC staff acts as liaison to the Task Force; Commissioners, the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency, 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 STIP reform legislation (i.e., SB 45) in 1997 significantly increased the responsibilities of regional 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 following information is provided to highlight the challenges and accomplishments that have involved Task Force members in 2001, as well as the issues that will continue to confront Task Force members in the future.

ISSUES and CHALLENGES

Environmental Streamlining for Federal Regulations

One of the greatest impediments to on-time, on-budget project delivery is compliance with Federal environmental regulations. While an issue throughout California, it is a particularly daunting challenge for rural agencies who are, among other activities, planning some of the most significant bypass projects in the state, including the Willits Bypass, Prunedale Bypass, Lincoln Bypass, and Angels Camp Bypass, which raise significant environmental issues.

More notably, rural agencies have little or no control over the environmental assessment process. Consultations that should take a matter of weeks can often take months or years; even obtaining information regarding delays is, at best, difficult. Rural areas are more than willing to negotiate mitigations that are fair and equitable, but the process, as it is currently implemented, often impedes progress.

Caltrans has tried to communicate the frustrations of rural agencies to the Federal Highway Administration and other federal regulatory agencies. This is reflected in Caltrans Director Jeff Morales' July 13, 2001, letter to U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta, outlining some ways to move projects forward while meeting federal requirements.

Efforts

The Rural County Task Force has pledged to assist in whatever way possible to shorten the timelines for Federal approvals of major transportation projects. Meanwhile, Task Force members also serve on 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 beyond the control or influence of the sponsoring agency. Rural counties have asked that the Commission continue to underscore the seriousness of this problem to the Legislature and the Administration and be sympathetic to these facts in dealing with timely use of funds issues.

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 Commission recognized this need when, in 1998, it opened the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) to local road rehabilitation projects for rural and urban counties alike. Many local road rehabilitation projects subsequently were added to the STIP, even though such projects do not fit well within the intent or the mechanics of the STIP process and sometimes serve to preempt funding for larger projects more common to the STIP.

The funding picture for local road rehabilitation projects brightened somewhat with the Governor's Traffic Congestion Relief Program (TCRP), via its one-time \$400 million distribution for maintenance and an estimated \$120 million for each of the next five years. Further help is offered by Assembly Constitutional Amendment 4 (ACA 4), which will go before the voters in March 2002; that measure, which would commence when the TCRP ends, would permanently restrict the use of the sales tax on gasoline for transportation purposes, thus offering an on-going increase in funding for local road rehabilitation. Nevertheless, despite the welcome relief from the TCRP and ACA 4, the backlog of local road rehabilitation is of such magnitude that both measures combined will not generate sufficient funding to fully eliminate the backlog of local road disrepair for rural areas.

Efforts

The Task Force has continuously focused on reducing the \$1 billion backlog of rehabilitation projects that would bring rural county roads up to "good" condition, as well as providing a dedicated funding source for the \$50 million needed annually to maintain those rural roads in good condition. While rural counties support passage of ACA 4, they have expressed a concern that its passage might create the perception that the issue of local road disrepair has been resolved. The Task Force is working to make decision makers aware that, even with the passage

of ACA 4; some of California's smallest rural counties would continue to need additional funds to address this 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.

New Project Funding Sources

The Rural Counties Task Force reports that existing resources are not sufficient to make the capital improvements needed to provide effective transportation systems in rural areas. Transportation improvements identified in local Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs), must be limited to those projects that are “financially realistic”. More and more counties find themselves unable to reconcile the project needs with their realistic funding expectations over the 20-year life of these plans.

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% or 55% majority threshold, few -- if any -- could meet the currently required 2/3 majority.

Continuing Issues

- The Rural Counties Task Force joins with their urban counterparts in supporting the development of additional sources of funding for needed transportation projects. The Task Force supports ACA 4 as an important first step in that effort.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

State Only Funding

Commission and Caltrans staff worked closely with Rural County Task Force members to develop a policy to continue to provide state-only funds for local road projects of \$750,000 or less, as well as matching funds for the federal dollars in the STIP, including Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) where applicable. The Task Force equally appreciates the Commission’s policy to allow rural areas to exchange Transportation Enhancement Activities (TEA) and Regional Surface Transportation Program (RSTP) funds for state-only dollars. These policies allow Task Force members to avoid dealing with cumbersome federal processes such as federal environmental regulations on small projects, such as rehabilitation of minor roads, enabling rural areas to use State funds more expeditiously, with more of them being used for "product" rather than "process".

Rural areas recognize that state-only funds are a scarce resource that is highly sought after, and that Caltrans must manage their use accordingly. However, the continuation of these Commission policies to allow rural counties to exchange federal dollars and provide state-only funds for small projects is of critical importance.

Planning, Programming, and Monitoring (PPM) Funds

One key lesson from SB 45 is that quality planning, programming, and monitoring of projects are essential to project delivery. Those activities require staffing or consultants with the expertise to wade through the myriad of federal requirements and state procedures associated with moving a project from concept to construction. In this regard, rural counties often find themselves at a disadvantage: obtaining and retaining personnel or consultants with the appropriate expertise costs money. Planning, programming, and monitoring (PPM) funds, which SB 45 made available from the STIP, is a critical source of such funding for rural counties. However, the statutory limit for regions to program no more than 2% of their Regional STIP funds for PPM places an undue restriction on rural counties. For those counties with STIP County Shares of only a few million dollars in any given STIP cycle, 2% does not begin to approach the costs of adequate PPM activities.

The Rural Counties Task Force has worked closely with the Regional Council of Rural Counties to develop legislation that would increase the allowable amount allocated to PPM from 2% to 5%. This was included in AB 608 (Dickerson) in the 2001-02 legislative session, Chapter 815, Statutes of 2001.

Caltrans Local Assistance

The effects of SB 45 have included a significant increased demand on Caltrans Local Assistance resources. Rural counties in particular depend on the expertise of Caltrans Local Assistance program to guide them through the maze of federal and State requirements. In response to this need, Caltrans Local Assistance staffing has tripled during the current Administration, and Caltrans is now able to practice a more direct outreach to the local jurisdictions.

While improvements to Local Assistance are important, Caltrans' efforts can only go so far. For example, Caltrans personnel can help to explain the new federal DBE requirements or the processing of a federal environmental document, they cannot directly staff these efforts for small cities or counties; hence the need for additional PPM funds and state-only funding.

The Commission and Task Force members engaged Caltrans in discussions to identify further improvements. Task Force members have been working successfully with their Caltrans Districts' Local Assistance programs to facilitate better communications and information flow between Caltrans and project sponsors and improve project delivery.

Rural Planning Assistance (RPA) Funds

Previous efforts by the Rural Counties Task Force and Caltrans resulted in the doubling of Rural Planning Assistance funds within the Caltrans budget starting in FY 2000-01. The primary need and use for these additional funds is to improve the Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs) and transportation planning processes in rural counties.

The Task Force has acknowledged Caltrans' successful efforts to improve the speed at which agencies are reimbursed for RPA funds. In small agencies, cash flow is an issue, and Caltrans' improved reimbursement has made a big difference.

Prior to this additional funding, some rural county regional plans had not been updated for ten years. With the help of these planning funds, all rural counties are expected to have updated regional plans ready for the 2002 STIP.

Interregional Transportation Improvement Program (ITIP)

As Task Force members gear up to prepare their 2002 Regional Transportation Improvement Programs (RTIPs) for the 2002 STIP, so Caltrans is developing their 2002 ITIP. Under SB 45, 25% of the STIP is to be programmed into the ITIP, with primary focus outside of urban areas. This creates a particularly strong connection between RTIP and ITIP projects for rural areas, because so many of the Task Force members' largest transportation challenges are on the state highway system. At the same time, many of these projects have price tags that far outstrip the capacity and the ability of the local agencies to fund them. That is where ITIP participation becomes so critical.

The Task Force is particularly enthused about the way Caltrans has addressed the 2002 ITIP. In the past, the timing of the ITIP project selection had made it difficult for local agencies to adequately coordinate their RTIP submittals for potential jointly funded projects, since they could not anticipate what was or was not going to be included in the ITIP. In the 2002 STIP cycle, Caltrans has been proactive in seeking RTIP/ITIP partnerships with local agencies. The process is much more transparent, and there has been a far higher level of communication between Caltrans and local agencies about the Department's priorities. Of particular value is Caltrans' commitment to provide an ITIP in advance of the normal December due date, thus giving local agencies time to craft and coordinate their RTIP submittals with the ITIP.

Commission Liaison to the Rural Counties

The transportation needs and issues of rural counties are unique, and those sensibilities need representation on the Commission. Throughout its history, the Task Force has enjoyed and benefited by the direct participation of a Commission member to serve as a liaison for rural issues on behalf of the full Commission and to lend voice and insight to these issues at Commission meetings. Continuing that tradition, the Task Force has expressed its appreciation to the current Commission liaison, Commissioner Kirk Lindsey. Task Force members regularly

communicate and coordinate with Commissioner Lindsey to provide input on the rural perspective to the Commission activities.

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:

- Interregional Transportation Strategic Plan
- AB1012 Implementation Steering Committee
- SB 45 Project Monitoring/Reporting Data Base
- Local Assistance “Enhanced Training and Outreach”
- SB 335 Transportation Issues
- Caltrans, City, County, Federal Highway Administration Coordinating Group
- State Planning Guidelines Development Quality Assurance Team
- California Transportation Investment Strategy (CTIS)
- Universal Transportation Project Identifier (UTPI) Project
- Next TEA Federal Reauthorization
- FTA 5310, Welfare to Work Advisory Committee, Rural Transit Issues
- Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS)
- Small Project Streamlining Committee
- Context Sensitive Solutions Committee

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)