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From: Susan Sanger [mailto:suesanger@comcast.net]

Sent: Monday, June 25, 2012 4:48 PM

To: Bill Hargis; Kevin Roggenbuck

Subject: solicitation scoring

Bill and Kevin-

I have spent some time since the last TAB meeting mulling over my thoughts and reactions to our discussion regarding project selection process. Frankly, I felt somewhat uncomfortable during our discussion for several reasons:

1. I didn't fully understand the scoring process - both the criteria used for ranking and the apparent vacuum in which each project is considered, without comparison to other proposed projects.
2. I didn't understand that (apparently) the # of projects selected within each category is relative to the # proposed for that category, rather than an overall comparison among all proposed projects. It seems like this could lead to some fairly skewed results.
3. The apparent reliance just on technical criteria, and lack of policy basis for project selection, is troubling to me. There seems to be an unstated presumption that all types of projects are equally important, with which I disagree. Perhaps policy considerations went into the development of the scoring criteria - if so; it would be helpful to have some background.
4. I really appreciated the information given to TAB by Metro Transit at the end of the discussion re: the rationale and evaluation process for the Eden Prairie park-and-ride lot proposal. But it was troubling to me that (1) the park-and-ride lot proposals were reviewed without reference to other nearby park-and-ride sites, (2) this info wasn't volunteered at the beginning of the discussion, and (3) this comparative info was apparently not requested, or was overlooked, by TAC. This erodes my trust in the TAC scoring process.
5. We were given very little info about the nature of each of the selected projects and those "on the bubble", so it was difficult for me to try to consider the merits of each one. This process seems to encourage TAB "rubber stamping" the TAC recommendations (though it may not have been designed with this goal in mind) and would prefer to cast a more informed vote.

It seems to me that TAB would benefit from some briefings about the scoring and selection process, and from some policy discussions about how to prioritize transportation spending. I don't know when was the last time this was done, but perhaps these processes should be reviewed and reanalyzed for current relevance.

Your thoughts?

Sue Sanger

Transportation Advisory Board

of the Metropolitan Council of the Twin Cities

August 1, 2012

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Sue Sanger
St. Louis Park City Council
4717 W. 28th Street
St. Louis Park, MN 55416

Dear Sue,

Thank you for your comments on the conclusion of the 2011 regional solicitation process at the June 20 TAB meeting. For new members this can be a confusing and complicated step in the process. It seems your questions fall into three categories; what is the policy basis for the criteria and how are the criteria developed; how the projects are scored and ranked; and how the funds are awarded through options forwarded by the TAC. I will answer your questions under those headings.

POLICY BASIS FOR TECHNICAL CRITERIA

The TAC Funding & Programming Committee and full TAC discussed the 2011 solicitation criteria and process at their meetings from July 2010 through March 2011. They discussed the policy direction from the TAB and how that should be written into the 2011 solicitation, as well as technical comments and issues. All proposed changes were presented to the TAB Programming Committee and full TAB prior to adoption and the start of the solicitation.

The TAB adopted a draft for public comment in February 2011, held a public meeting on the draft in March 2011 and adopted the final 2011 regional solicitation package in April 2011. All the discussion about policy direction occurred before you joined the TAB in June 2011.

The regional solicitation process uses weighted technical criteria, most of which are derived from the goals, policies and implementation strategies in the region's Transportation Policy Plan. The most common criteria are crash reduction (safety), auto emission reduction (air quality) and congestion reduction (mobility). The solicitation process also includes criteria to estimate how the project supports the Regional Development Framework. Our process allows applicants to appeal the scores given to their project. The applicant provides a written request and reason(s) why the criterion should be rescored and the issue is resolved by the TAC Funding & Programming Committee in an open meeting. The final scores of all the projects in the 2011 solicitation were approved by the technical committees and presented to the TAB in May, 2012. Staff explained how the scores were determined and the Board accepted them, so it would not have been appropriate to change the scores at the June TAB meeting. The main issue regarding the Southwest Transit project is the amount of funding available in the CMAQ program. Consistency with regional policies is a qualifying criterion. The Southwest Transit project did meet the qualifying criteria and was scored with all the other transit expansion projects. At the June meeting we did not change the score of the Southwest Transit project. But it was below the line used and therefore not recommended for funding.

SOLICITATION PROJECT SCORING

In March 2012, Kevin presented to the TAB Programming Committee how projects are scored and how ranked lists of projects are developed. Here is how it's done - teams of volunteers are formed to score projects in each of the ten project categories in the regional solicitation. Each of the ten scoring groups is chaired by a member of the TAC or TAC Funding & Programming Committee, and a Council staff person and Kevin manage each scoring group. Members are recruited from city and county public works departments and from state and regional agencies. Each scoring group member scores one or two criteria for each application in the project group. Most scoring group members have an expertise in scoring a particular criterion. For example, the MnDOT Metro Safety Engineer scores the crash reduction criteria for all the five roadway categories. Each volunteer scores the criteria on their own time and the scoring group convenes to tabulate the results. Each scorer must describe how they scored the criteria and the points awarded so the scoring group can endorse the results of each scorer. The scoring group will resolve any questions about the methodology and scoring and then endorse the scores.

Projects within each category are in fact compared to each other during scoring. They are scored relative to each other, meaning that the benefits that the projects provide in each of the criteria are compared to each other and the higher scores are given to the projects that provide the most benefit. We do not compare scores across categories because the criteria are often different, the weight of the criteria can be different and they are scored by different people. Kevin gave the TAB Programming Committee updates on the technical committees' progress in developing the 2011 solicitation package and updates on the schedule, qualifying and scoring of projects in the solicitation almost every month from July 2010 through April 2012.

In May, TAB was provided with the final project scores, which included a description of each project as it would be programmed into the TIP. The descriptions explain the scope of the project and specific construction elements. The solicitation process really is about the technical merits of each project. The TAB relies on the TAC to make those technical evaluations and judgments within the policy direction given to them by the TAB. The TAC then makes recommendations to the Board for action.

FUNDING OPTIONS

The TAB asks the technical committees to develop at least two funding options for their consideration. The TAB asks that the options have different themes or reasons why the options include the projects. It is not easy to come up with different options since the selection of projects must follow the ranked lists and this year there is uncertainty about how much federal money there will actually be. The TAB may choose one of the options forwarded by the TAC or they may create their own macro plan of projects to receive funding; however, the TAB does not skip over any projects to get to another farther down the list.

We award funds based on the ranked list, top to bottom, but there can be variations in how far we go down each list in the different categories. One theme has traditionally been to develop a funding option that mirrors the amount of federal funds requested in the various project categories because we consider the number of applications submitted to be a reflection of need. It costs several thousand dollars to hire a consultant to fill out an application. It also takes a considerable amount of staff time to prepare and application, so we consider all these applications to reflect legitimate needs. The most significant change the TAB adopted into the 2011 regional solicitation process was the inclusion of criteria in the "A" Minor Arterial Augmenter category to include "Roadway Condition and Age". This was done to award points to roads that needed reconstruction but not necessarily increased capacity. The second option forwarded by the TAC included three more Augmenter projects and fewer other projects as a different theme.

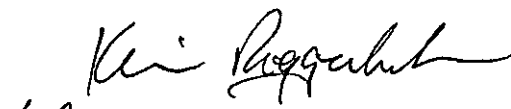
Specifically about the CMAQ Transit projects submitted by Southwest Transit, Council Staff James Andrew or Kevin should have spoken up and explained the technical issues about market area overlap with the other transit project and what courses of action the Board could take. The scoring of CMAQ projects does take into consideration other existing transit facilities that could reduce the value of the project being scored, however, the scoring does not assume that one proposed project could reduce the value of another. The park and ride lots were scored appropriately per the criteria we used. At the June meeting we did not change the scores as the scores had been finalized in May. The Southwest project received 233 points less than the Shakopee project. The issue here is in how we select projects within the federal funding silos (CMAQ silo). The TAB has always allocated all the available CMAQ program funds only to projects submitted in the CMAQ project categories. The technical committees did what they always have done and did not stray from its responsibility. TAB simply drew the funding line above the Southwest project and awarded that money to two trail projects in another category where the scoring was closer.

After each solicitation, the TAB and TAC have a debriefing on what worked and what could be improved in the next solicitation. The TAB may provide policy direction to change the solicitation and the technical committees work on technical issues to improve the criteria we use to evaluate projects and to make the solicitation criteria process more understandable to applicants. We are in fact doing a more extensive review of the solicitation this fall for the next cycle.

The TAB will develop a draft solicitation package and hold a public meeting to describe the changes from the previous solicitation. People in attendance can ask questions and give opinions/recommendations that are taken into consideration by the TAC and TAB when finalizing the solicitation criteria. Written comments can be submitted as well. In the down time between the 2011 solicitation and the next one, as mentioned a fresh study will be undertaken to see how well the solicitation process lines up with changing regional transportation goals and policies, how effective the projects funded by the TAB have been in resolving transportation problems, and how the actual solicitation process steps can be improved. The TAB will be very much involved in the study.

The process used is not perfect but is consistent and there is built in the opportunity to change the scoring system on a prospective but not retroactive basis. You came on TAB in the midst of the 2011 solicitation and you will have an opportunity to shape all aspects of the next solicitation. Kevin and I look forward to meeting with you on August 7 to discuss the solicitation process with you.

Sincerely,


for Bill Hargis, Chair