



TECHNICAL STEERING COMMITTEE REGIONAL SOLICITATION

August 27, 2024

Steering Committee Attendees:

Paul Oehme, Danny McCullough, Doran Cote, Chris Hartzell, Reuben Collins, Molly McCartney, Jillian Linnell, Jim Kosluchar, Lyssa Leitner, Steve Elmer, Nathan Koster, Matt Fyten, Aaron Tag, Joe MacPherson

Other Attendees:

Steve Peterson, Molly Stewart, Bethany Brandt – Sargent, Elaine Koutsoukos, Robbie King, Charles Carlson, Katie Caskey, Cole Hiniker, Joe Barbeau, Maddie Garces, Jason Pieper

Introduction

Chair Paul Oehme welcomed committee members.

Molly Stewart recapped the last meeting (May 2024).

Investment Summary

Molly Stewart reviewed the goals and takeaways of the investment summary. Key takeaways to the process included the addition of new categories. Molly discussed some of the high-level findings about the investment from 2014 – 2022 including distribution of funding by location (what county was the project located in) and how that compares to employment and population by county, monetized safety benefits by year, impacts on the MnDOT system, multimodal investments, funding by application category.

Chair Oehme were interested in learning more about the split of project funding covered by Regional Solicitation federal funds and how much was covered by the local share and if there are trends between project types. The consultant team will incorporate this inquiry into the final version of the Investment Summary.

Member McCartney clarified that the takeaways would not include the Interstate system since they're not eligible. She also brought up that local roads have also benefitted (in addition to MnDOT owned roads). MnDOT contributes letters of support for lots of these projects that impact the system.

Steve Peterson pointed out that there were a lot of reconstruction projects on the state system in 2024 (ex. Robert Street). Members Tag and McCartney noted that a lot of the reconstruction projects were related to multimodal improvements that would be hard to do without Regional Solicitation funding. It was also noted that there were also 75 miles of trails and sidewalks construction/reconstruction.

In addition to the content presented, Member Kosluchar wanted to learn more about funding by category cycle to cycle and the average share of local match by year. Member Leitner mentioned that it would be helpful to highlight which entities are not applying.

Member Koster asked about figuring out whether the Regional Solicitation funds make up the first or last dollars of a project and whether it keeps up with rising project costs? He also noted that this could depend on whether the goal of the funding was to supplement larger projects or fund most or all of local, smaller projects. Elaine Koutsoukos responded that projects that are applied for in portions can be the result of time, labor, and other costs rising over the course of a project. Cole Hiniker mentioned that for transit projects specifically, there's a perception that they have a lot of winning projects. When

the match wasn't immediately available, they took a first dollar in approach to the regional solicitation funds.

Before and After Study

Molly Stewart discussed the role of the Before-and-After Study in the RSE and the methodology for the study.

Decision Point #1: Select preferred solicitation structure by October 2024

Decision making approach & Confirming Evaluation Goals

Molly reviewed the project's four decision (this was shared in May as well). The Regional Solicitation program goals were also discussed – specifically, how to better tie federally funded project selection to the goals, objectives, and policies of the 2050 TPP.

Steve Peterson reviewed the federal rules for the Regional Solicitation.

Follow up on feedback received (Katie Caskey)

Katie Caskey provided a follow up on the feedback on the peer review and covered themes from the peer review summary (a full memo on the review is being prepared).

Member MacPherson noted that it can be hard for projects in rural areas to compete with urban projects in certain categories. For example, bike/ped projects use metrics (population and employment density) that favor certain geographies over others.

Member Leitner mentioned that this challenge persists across all modal categories. Different geographies could need different metrics or criteria or thresholds particularly related to safety benefits that can be proactive or reactive because in less populated areas traffic volumes are lower and there may be lots of near misses which are hard to capture.

Member Collins noted that the City of Saint Paul completes most ped/bike applications are in-house and usually contracts for roadway applications since they don't have the capacity to complete the traffic modeling needed. Member Leitner asked what the current traffic modeling, which is a lot of work, actually does to help with the selection process, are the best projects being funded because of this measure? Member MacPherson responded that the measure continues to allow trunk highway projects, which need the money, to apply for funding.

Member McCullough commented that bicycle crash data is challenging to capture and quantify. While a typical crash report should reflect bike/ped involvement, this can vary widely depending on the detail provided by officer writing the original crash report. In summary, bike/ped crashes are not as easy to decipher as car vs car crash data.

Member Koster asked if there could be a better way to demonstrate how projects meet the goals of the PROTECT and Carbon Reduction funding programs. Are there better criteria or measures to use? If the funds from these programs are being used to fill gaps in projects, this should be more intentional.

Member Collins noted that the City of Saint Paul has had success in unique projects category (with EV charging – which should be in a category in the future). What category would projects that focus on traffic calming apply in? Ped safety projects don't necessarily use crash data, these projects also deal with driver safety/roadway improvement. (ex. 4 to 3 lane conversions without a full reconstruction).

Member MacPherson suggested that volume classifications could be lowered to allow more roadway types to apply, or there could be a subcategory for these projects. Member Kosluchar added support for adjusting the eligibility requirement and opening to non-minor arterials and adding new project subcategories.

Member Kosluchar also noted that there should be a separate category for multimodal/pedestrian bridges that is separate from trail connections. Member McCullough agreed and noted that there is a safety benefit for peds and bikes with separated crossings.

Member Koster added that there is no clear answer currently about what to do with projects that provide safety benefits/Safe Streets for All/traffic calming that are not unique to urban or suburban areas. A meaningful safety category could be used system wide to address systemic issues like speeding and traffic calming.

Member McCartney asked whether there are projects currently being applied for that shouldn't be eligible?

Member Leitner commented that Washington County has had instances when projects have received funding but struggled to close the gap so haven't submitted projects. Even for projects that might be good scoring but don't submit because of local match.

Member MacPherson agreed that currently applications are not geared towards widespread traffic/road improvements (ex. installing speed bumps at multiple locations in a neighborhood or city). He asked if the set aside for ABRT could be more fluid and not just used for transit but instead could move between the categories (e.g. fund a large roadway project that is a regional priority).

Member Fyten noted that transit funding has changed a lot especially with the addition of the regional sales tax; however, there is a need to ask if the ABRT set aside is still needed or if the funding should consider other transit modes? Microtransit might be one project type that could use more funding from a transit perspective.

Steve Peterson mentioned that TAB expressed interest in planning studies as project types and wanted to know more about how peers did this. Specifically, how planning studies are scored and weighted by other MPOs. Typically, projects would start as a study then submits for capital funding later on.

Cole Hiniker asked if the Peer Region desktop review or interviews show that we are an outlier in terms of soliciting for projects 4 years out?

Elaine Koutsoukos noted some peers would make set asides for large roadway projects peers. In our case we want to look at future funding and make sure that what we have is fluid. There is no way to know exactly what will be in the next transportation bill.

Member Fyten mentioned that in the current scoring process it is hard to account for the diversity of transit projects within the Transit and TDM category. Scoring these projects against each other it is challenging. He also noted that there is not a category for state of good repair projects.

Member MacPherson asked about other MPOs that have gone to more qualitative scoring and how they scored projects against each other and maintained consistency? Katie Caskey responded that their structures include open responses to a series of questions. Then they have a smaller group of people scoring a shorter application. We have the most quantitative process in the country. Joe Barbeau added that MPOs with more qualitative applications weren't point-based to begin with and that these peers typically rank projects as low, medium, and high. Member Koster noted this is more like federal RAISE grants that utilize merit criteria to determine eligibility, then low/med/high scoring for qualitative questions. Some peers have a two-step process of some quantitative evaluation followed by qualitative.

Member Koster asked if there could be a tiered approach to the Regional Solicitation process to weed out projects (e.g. a minimum score a project must have to even be eligible). He noted a better approach could be to focus on getting the best projects funded vs trying to hit modal targets. Cole Hiniker noted that setting funding targets is easier to do with less categories and could also be easier with a priorities focused process vs modal focused. Member MacPherson noted that it could be hard to get rid of modal categories as agencies develop projects that are modal based (e.g. roadway, bike/ped, transit). How do the modes get incorporated into a goal focused approach?

Member MacPherson noted that it could be better to have percent or dollar amount minimum and not ranges at the start so there is less back and forth on where to draw the line. Member Kosluchar noted that a consistent and clear application process may be an effective way to get new applicants.

Among the options for changing the process, TAB has discussed a blind review for geographic evenness, (this could involve redacting the name of projects).

Member MacPherson asked if the other MPOs have opinions on our process? Kiernan Maletsky responded that though we have the most data-driven and complex. Being too reliant on scoring may not lead to the best outcomes.

Member McCullough expressed interest in hearing how proposed planning studies are scored or weighed in other MPO areas that do this. Elaine Koutsoukos responded that the Active Transportation Work Group discussed studies being eligible for funding, so that applicants can become eligible for applying for infrastructure projects.

Preview of Policymaker Working Group September meeting

Molly Stewart previewed the Policymaker Working Group meeting which will focus on the structure of the Regional Solicitation. Should we retain structure based on modal categories or based on goals of the TPP?

Member MacPherson mentioned that changing to goals based could be a drastic switch but potentially a good idea and worth considering. Completely eliminating modal categories would be difficult. If there is a concern that some mode types might not get funded in certain categories, could we break down percentages/minimums within goal categories? Member Collins added that switching to goal-based might make it harder to compare projects with very different scopes that pursue the same goal. Currently similarly scoped projects naturally group together in modes.

Member Koster noted the idea of a safety set aside/category and proposed a process where an applicant could apply in a modal category and check a box that it would also like to be considered for the safety category.

Member Kosluchar clarified that scoring is already tied to the goals as well as the criteria and metrics used. However, modal categories make it difficult to explicitly tie back and explain the benefits Member Kosluchar asked if funding ranges could be tied to goal areas instead of modal categories. Steve Peterson added that the 2050 TPP has five goals and these could be tied to categories or criteria, and both could achieve the goal of tying to the TPP. Cole Hiniker also mentioned that the last regional solicitation evaluation was done before we knew the 2040 goals. We're in a better position now to ask this question with the 2050 TPP.

Next Steps

The Technical Steering Committee meeting will be October 22, 1-3 p.m.

For the next meeting members were asked to think about technical feedback that can be provided to the Policymaker Working Group and to share thoughts on Investment Summary with Molly Stewart.

Action Item	Timeline
Prepare feedback for the Policymaker Working Group ahead of the October 22 meeting	October
Incorporate feedback on the Investment Summary into the final version	Early September