

TASK 18

CONSISTENCY WITH REGIONAL PLANS TECHNICAL MEMO

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North-South Commuter Rail
Feasibility Study
Task 18: Consistency with Regional Plans
Technical Memo

1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The North-South Commuter Rail Feasibility Study took into account planning policies and assumptions developed by the Michigan Department of Transportation, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, the Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan, the Washtenaw Area Transportation Study and the planning departments for Livingston County and Washtenaw County to document consistency with regional plans and planning practices. An overview of each of these agencies is provided below along with documentation relevant to the North-South Commuter Rail project.

Michigan Department of Transportation

The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) Commuter Rail Program is actively working with community efforts to help plan and implement locally led commuter rail projects in the state. This includes passenger rail efforts between a city center and nearby suburbs or towns/cities to draw large numbers of commuters.

MDOT has developed a State Rail Plan (2011) to guide the future development of Michigan's rail system for both passenger and freight rail over a 20 year timeframe. The plan identifies current and future system needs and makes recommendations to encourage ongoing rail investments. The plan meets the requirements established by the federal Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008, which positions the state to receive additional federal funding for rail projects. One of the goals of the plan is to promote the efficient movement of passengers by providing new and enhanced passenger rail service to Michigan communities and travelers as an efficient and cost-effective mobility alternative. This plan references the Howell to Ann Arbor Regional Rail (WALLY) as an intercity passenger rail that could provide transportation options for the public, reduce pollution/energy reduction, promote livable communities and create short- and long-term employment.

Southeast Michigan Council of Governments

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) is a regional planning partnership of governmental units serving 4.7 million people in the seven-county region of Southeast Michigan. Membership includes Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw and Wayne counties along with numerous townships, cities, villages, community colleges and intermediate school districts in these counties. SEMCOG supports local planning through its technical, data, and intergovernmental resources.

SEMCOG, as the established Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the seven-county Southeast Michigan region is responsible for developing a Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP). Through the TIP, Southeast Michigan elected officials and stakeholders develop projects that reflect regional priorities. The TIP contains a list of capital and operational projects that will maintain and improve the transportation system in Southeast Michigan. The TIP also serves as the primary tool for assessing compliance with federal and state requirements and demonstrates the steps toward achieving the outcomes of Southeast Michigan's 2040 Regional Transportation Plan (2013) (RTP). Projects must be shown in the TIP in order to use federal funds.

SEMCOG has acknowledged the WALLY (Washtenaw and Livingston Line) as a potential commuter rail project in the US-23 corridor that could mitigate heavy congestion between the cities of Howell and Ann Arbor. The RTP references funding to continue developing stations for commuter rail

service between Ann Arbor and Howell and the Illustrative Project List includes the Washtenaw County share of commuter rail operations from Howell to Ann Arbor as an unfunded project. Such projects are not part of the approved project list because of lack of funding. The illustrative list includes only the location, description, phase of project and total estimated costs. Should federal funding for this project become available, it could be moved by amendment from the illustrative list to the TIP assuming it can comply with the required demonstration of financial constraint and completes the air quality conformity analysis.

SEMCOG completed an independent travel market assessment to provide a preliminary reference for ridership projections (see Task 6: Demand for Service Technical Memo) and a representative from SEMCOG sat on the Steering Committee for this study.

Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan

The purpose of the newly created Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan (RTA) is to plan for and coordinate public transportation in the four-county Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw and Wayne region, including the City of Detroit, and to deliver rapid transit in a region where none exists. It is the entity through which transit providers must apply for state and federal funds, and through which those funds are allocated to providers. The RTA developed a Regional Master Transit Plan (2016) to guide present and future service and is empowered to put funding questions on the ballot for public vote. The Regional Master Transit Plan acknowledges the Washtenaw and Livingston Line (WALLY) as a recognized project that would increase mobility but is not proposed to be funded by the RTA at this time. Livingston County is not a member of the RTA and it is unlikely that the RTA would fund service outside of its jurisdiction.

As of this writing, the RTA has not yet established an on-going funding mechanism, and the future of the agency is uncertain.

Washtenaw Area Transportation Study

The Washtenaw Area Transportation Study (WATS) is a regional transportation planning agency with 21 local members who work collaboratively with SEMCOG, MDOT and the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) to set local transportation policy and prioritize improvements for Washtenaw County. The agency is mandated by Federal law to provide a continuing, cooperative and comprehensive transportation planning process, which guides the expenditure of state and federal transportation funds in Washtenaw County.

WATS prepared the Draft 2040 Long Range Transportation Plan for Washtenaw County UPDATE (2017) which is a component of SEMCOG's RTP. The plan identified that commuter rail service has been a perennial goal of transit and planning agencies in southeast Michigan and acknowledged that local, regional, private and transit groups have attempted to bring, and/or continue to plan for, investments in commuter and high capacity transit. The plan recognizes the Washtenaw-Livingston Line (WALLY) as a passenger rail service to connect Ann Arbor/University of Michigan with employees along the US-23 corridor, north to Howell. This project is currently listed as unfunded by WATS but identified as a locally initiated effort to attempt to relieve congestion, spur economic growth, provide recreational opportunities and connect neighborhoods with the commercial centers they border. WATS supports such projects in their attempt to obtain federal funding.

WATS initiates calls for projects based on SEMCOG's TIP and/or RTP schedules. WATS staff scores the applications and provides a ranking for each project to the County's Federal Aid Committee and the WATS Technical and Policy Committee for approval.

A representative from WATS sat on the Steering Committee for this study.

Livingston and Washtenaw Counties

In addition to the regional transportation planning agencies, Livingston County and Washtenaw County would also be integral to evaluating how potential North-South Commuter Rail service would align with their planning policies. The Livingston County Planning Department is responsible for comprehensive community planning and, more specifically, transportation planning and economic development. Washtenaw County no longer performs traditional land use planning functions and does not have a Planning Commission however the Board of Commissioners would coordinate required elements of this project.

