

Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC)

Meeting Minutes of February 28, 2024

A meeting of the Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) was held over Zoom and in-person in the first-floor conference room at the MARC office in Ascutney. The discussions began at 6:00pm, although the meeting

Attendance

TAC Members Present: Kristi Morris, Springfield; Peter Hudkins, Chester; John Saydek, Cavendish; Sharon Bixby, Ludlow; Barbara Bye, At-Large; Eric Bye, At Large; Wayne Wheelock, Baltimore (arrived at 6:30pm).

Others Present: Jason Rasmussen, MARC; Logan Nicoll, MARC.

Kristi Morris called the meeting to order at 6:17 PM

1. Welcome and introductions

All present members and guests introduced themselves.

2. Changes to the agenda

No changes were necessary.

3. Acceptance of December 14 minutes

Peter Hudkins made a motion to approve minutes as presented. Seconded by John Saydek. The motion passed unanimously.

4. Review of the current TAC Bylaws

Kristi asked about the timeline for updating the TAC Bylaws.

Logan explained there is no draft for consideration so there is no formal timeline yet. The agenda item is simply to start the discussion with the committee about potentially updating the bylaws and what changes the committee would like to see.

Kristi asked about differences between the committee's bylaws and other TACs in our region.

Logan explained that most differences were simply conforming to modern formatting and diction conventions. The primary impetus for taking this up is that the current bylaws still reference the "Southern Windsor County Transportation Advisory Committee" which doesn't reflect the Regional Planning Commission's name change to the "Mount Ascutney Regional Commission". Logan also proposed including a code of ethics in the bylaws which many other municipal boards have started including in their bylaws in the past decade, although most other TACs in Vermont have not yet.

Jason proposed discussing the language around what a quorum is in the bylaws.

Logan said the current bylaws qualify a quorum as 50% of *appointed* members, as opposed to other TACs where towns without appointed members count against achieving a quorum.

Jason and Kristi said that the language around a quorum was discussed and amended in the past because of past issues maintaining a quorum.

Kristi noted that the TRORC TAC sets a quorum at a static 5 members of a 30+ member committee as opposed to a percentage of appointed members.

Peter and Jason noted that if the committee adopted a similar percentage a quorum would consist of 3 members.

The committee discussed appointed members and current vacancies in town-appointed members. The committee discussed what should be included in the new bylaws: primarily updating the name of the committee to the “Mount Ascutney Regional Commission Transportation Advisory Committee”, updating the formatting and modernizing the language, including a code of ethics and defining a quorum as four members.

Peter suggested increasing the role of the TAC’s at-large members and whether they should count towards a quorum if they are regular attendees.

Logan pointed to TRORC’s bylaws which do grant some of their at-large members voting authority.

Jason suggested that as an entity of the towns, maybe the at-large members should be given a vote but not count towards a quorum, so the at-large members are unable to act without a critical mass of town-appointed members present. The committee agreed this should be in the updated bylaws.

5. Update on Route 5 Bike Corridor Survey Results

Logan gave an update on the final report from the exploratory survey VTrans conducted about the potential for a bike corridor along Route 5. The towns within the TAC’s region mostly responded and really all the towns in the state showed interest and enthusiasm with moving forward.

6. VPSP2 Updates

a. Springfield – Consider Letter of Support

Logan gave an update on the VPSP2 project in Springfield. The state’s consultant has completed a very preliminary Regional Project Refinement Report that provides a basic outline of estimated costs to move forward with redesigning multiple intersections in downtown Springfield. Logan relayed that the consultant asked the Town of Springfield to submit a letter of support for moving forward with the project to VTrans and the TAC may want to weigh in as well.

The committee agreed to continue to support the project.

Peter Hudkins made a motion to authorize Chair Kristi Morris to sign a Letter of Support. Seconded by Sharon Bixby. The motion passed unanimously.

b. Cavendish

Logan reminded the board this project was on a similar timeline as the one in Springfield. It is about redesigning the intersection of Route 103 and Route 131 in Cavendish. The project was delayed because the town’s capacity in the wake of the summer flooding, however, there is a renewed effort on this front and the same consultant who completed the draft Regional Project Refinement Report for Springfield will be working on this project as well.

The committee discussed the options at this intersection, and how the length of the trains that run through this intersection has changed over the years and complicates any planning for this intersection.

c. Future Projects

Logan informed the board that VTrans has announced they have paused the VPSP2 selection process for another year. While projects that are in the pipeline will continue to move forward, there will not be another round for consideration of new projects for at least another year.

7. Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan Public Hearing Recap

Logan recapped the STIP Public hearing which occurred February 6th.

Peter raised some concern over a project in Chester that is included and budgeted for in the STIP which has not been formally presented to the town. Some in Chester do not believe VTrans current plan is the best design for that project and would like more input on how that project is developed.

8. Carbon Reduction Strategy Update

Logan told the committee that VTrans presented an update about their progress developing the Carbon Reduction Strategy at the last monthly TPI Meeting on February 15th. There is not much to review here at the moment, but just to be aware that this is in progress and there will be some opportunities for public comment upcoming. This will have serious implications for transportation projects and planning, so it is important to follow and engage at every opportunity.

Peter said there is bill in the legislature that he has been tracking which will change the way the state implements net-metering that he is concerned about which will affect a town's ability to support renewable energy. The issue is complicated by utilities that have not upgraded transmission lines and infrastructure improvements necessary to support larger renewable energy projects in disparate locations.

Kristi said the bill is H.289 and agreed that the things Peter mentioned are complicated, but the bill is a balancing act and the status quo is inequitable. It works for towns/utilities that have the means to support a large project but is an impassable barrier for lower-income entities.

Jason said the Carbon Reduction Strategy talks about increasing funding for bike and pedestrian projects.

9. Comprehensive Safety Action Plan Update (SS4A)

Logan updated the committee on the Safe Streets and Roads for All grant. This is a federal grant we received to assist in developing a Comprehensive Safety Action Plan. Logan invited any members of the TAC that want to be a part of this going forward to join the steering committee. We recently hired VHB to undertake the bulk of the work to write the plan and the steering committee will be meeting with them on March 18th to kick-off the project.

Jason said we originally sought this grant because some of our towns were interested in other federal grants for implementation projects but you need to have this plan to be eligible for those funds.

John offered to participate.

10. VTrans Grants-in-Aid Program Update

Logan gave an update on VTrans Grants-in-Aid program. Last year VTrans extended the due date for the FY23 Grant-in-Aid program on account of the July/August flooding. That program was supposed to be completed with all funds expended by September 2023. VTrans extended that to September 2024 to give towns time this coming summer to complete projects.

Jason said Ludlow may be one such town that has funds from this program that still need to be spent.

Peter said Chester may also have some money they have not spent yet.

Logan said that Chris Yurek from the MARC office is the primary point of contact for this program now and Chris also believes Springfield has some remaining funds.

Logan said there may be some confusion for towns because with the extension they may now have multiple years of funding and projects and keeping the funds separate for reporting purposes could be complicated.

Wayne said Baltimore was told they could combine the funds but that created confusion and now they are waiting for VTrans to recalculate and disburse their previously approved FY24 funds.

Jason said there is also confusion among towns about the different programs. There are a few different programs that fund similar work. Jason said there is a model MOU that went out with the TAC Agenda packet for towns to consider hiring MARC to help navigate administering the different grants and reporting requirements.

11. Other Updates

a. Toll Bridge – Between Springfield and Charlestown, NH

Logan said there was a fiery meeting recently about the plan to close the bridge between Springfield and Charlestown, NH next year while they re-paint and repair the structure. The bridge is owned by New Hampshire so not as much of a role for the TAC to be involved as they would be if it was a VTrans project. The bridge will be closed for up to 34 weeks from April 2025 through September 2025. The detour will be through Bellows Falls, and there are also concerns about the roads that will see higher traffic on the detours.

Jason said MARC is in communication with the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission in New Hampshire and coordinating outreach efforts. The UVLSRPC had a recent less than positive experience with a bridge project in Thetford and will be hoping to learn from that experience to improve public interactions for this project.

b. Legislature/T-Bill

Kristi and Logan said they have both been focused mostly on bills that don't have much nexus with Transportation the last few weeks, but the big bills are just starting to come out to the floor and they will be reviewing them closer now that they are being voted out of committees.

Logan said the biggest bill coming out of House Commerce is related to data privacy which doesn't have much of a nexus to transportation. House Commerce did discuss some issues related to towing practices in Vermont but is not going to move forward with a bill this year.

Jason said he testified in House Transportation and they are interested in exploring the difference in cost for projects that use federal funding for projects versus those that use only state or local monies. This data doesn't really exist, so it has been hard to track down but based on limited case studies he has done so far it seems like a state-funded project costs about 40% that of a similarly-sized federally-funded project. Jason said there are a lot of reasons for this "Buy America" is a factor, the different permits, design process, design standards and positions you are required to hire just to name a few. Peter said his experience in this realm supports those initial results.

Logan said a big discussion in the transportation committees has been declining revenues for the transportation fund, especially as it relates to the gas tax. The committees have heard that while this is related to electric cars, which obviously don't pay for gas and so don't pay the gas tax, the largest factor is really increasing fuel efficiency on gas/hybrid vehicles. So far the Senate has been leaning towards enacting a policy where the House has been going in the direction of a report and enacting a policy in a future session.

12. Future agenda items & next meeting date

Next meeting is March 27.

Wayne asked that we reach out to towns and ensure we have appointed TAC Members from every town. Especially considering our next meeting is after Town Meeting and their may be new Select Board members in some towns, make sure they know about the TAC and appoint members that can attend meetings.

Jason said West Windsor is the one town that currently does not have an appointed member.

13. Adjourn

Wayne Wheelock made a motion to adjourn. Seconded by John Saydek. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 7:38 PM.