

Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)

Outreach Summary

September 2013

Outreach Summary

In order to develop the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) for Minnesota, there were two key questions that needed to be answered before program specifics, such as the solicitation process for FY18 and beyond, could be developed. The two key questions were:

- What is the role of the formerly independent programs (i.e. SRTS, Scenic Byways, and Recreational Trails) in the TAP – should they receive separate funding allocations or all compete together?
- Should TAP projects be regionally selected (i.e. through the ATPs) or selected through a statewide competitive process?

In order to answer these questions, MnDOT held 14 outreach meetings related to the TAP and reached out to 2,700+ individuals; 360+ participated. Participants included the general public, transportation advocates and transportation partners, including ATPs and the program coordinators for TAP-eligible programs.

MnDOT held a series of outreach meetings across the state during the months of May and June. The first round of outreach consisted of four public meetings and asked participants to identify the strengths and weaknesses associated with state-led solicitation processes (e.g. SRTS, Scenic Byways) as well as regionally-led solicitation processes (e.g. Transportation Enhancements). A summary of the feedback received was then brought to various stakeholder groups including each ATP and meetings with the program leads for each of the statewide programs eligible for TAP (i.e. SRTS and Scenic Byways). The stakeholder groups were asked to review the feedback from the initial outreach meetings and discuss strategies that could be used to mitigate the weaknesses identified and capitalize on the strengths. The groups were asked to identify their preferences for the development of the overall structure for TAP but were also challenged to think about other options and discuss how their concerns could be addressed in different situations.

The feedback from both phases of the outreach was collected and synthesized by the TAP working group. The following sections of this document highlight the key messages from outreach as well as the outline for the program, both what and why, related to the two key decisions noted above.

Key Principles to Guide the Development of the Overall Program Structure

Based on the outreach discussions as well as state and federal direction, the TAP working group identified a list of key principles to guide the development of the overall program structure. Some of the principles stem from the primary messages that were heard consistently throughout all phases of outreach, from a variety of stakeholder groups. Others stem from key messages coming from both federal and state legislation. Some of the principles were derived from a combination of the two.

It is important to note that the principles represent high-level concepts that are meant to provide direction and inform decision-making related to TAP. As the specifics of the overall structure for TAP are addressed, the decisions made should strive to be as consistent as possible with these principles in order to ensure consistency with outreach as well as legislative direction.

The principles are detailed on the following pages, in no particular order.

- 1. Ensure Application Streamlining:** The desire for a simpler, more streamlined application process for the TAP was often noted as the most important consideration for the new program structure. Currently each ATP and each statewide program has a different application, selection process and at times solicitation cycle. It was noted that this variety often adds confusion and additional work for communities and those assisting them with applications. This is of particular concern given that typically the scopes of these projects, as well as the communities they are located in, are relatively small. A cumbersome application process was noted as a barrier for potential applicants and projects.
- 2. Strengthen the Role of the Area Transportation Partnerships (ATP):** The desire for a continued and strengthened role of the ATP in the selection of TAP projects was a common theme heard throughout outreach. ATP involvement brings knowledge of local issues and priorities to the project selection process. These are major factors in terms of project buy-in and successful delivery. Additionally, ATPs are positioned to provide a “gut check” on certain projects, which can supplement objective scoring and address concerns not able to be quantified. Including the ATPs in project vetting and selection in a real, substantive way will be critical to the success of the program.
- 3. Promote Projects Identified in Statewide and Regional Plans:** MnDOT and partners continually undergo considerable efforts to identify projects that align with and advance statewide and regional goals. These projects are considered priorities for the overall transportation system and/or for specific program or modal systems. They are identified through statewide and regional planning processes and documents (e.g. MnSHIP, Statewide Bicycle Plan, MPO plans). It was noted that these planning efforts typically involve extensive outreach and vetting in order to identify the key projects from a statewide or regional perspective. Because of this, it is important that the projects identified in these plans, when eligible, are able to be advanced through the TAP solicitation.

While some statewide and regional plans are already in existence, additional related plans may be added in future years (e.g. Statewide Pedestrian Plan). It is important that the TAP solicitation is set-up to address projects identified in current plans as well as future plans, when they are adopted.

- 4. Support Safe Routes to School:** An interest in maintaining a certain level of investment in Safe Routes to School (SRTS) was heard relatively consistently during outreach. While there were many different ideas expressed as to how this would be best accomplished, there was general support for the program. It was noted that this support has been demonstrated beyond the transportation community through the State Legislature appropriating State resources for SRTS as well as the Department of Health’s involvement in SRTS through SHIP, among other examples. Interest in SRTS in Minnesota is growing and continuing to invest TAP dollars to forward this program would help all develop partnerships and allow the SRTS community to leverage additional resources to continue to advance the program. Because of this, some degree of preference for SRTS projects, to ensure a minimum investment amount, will be incorporated in the TAP project selection process.

However, it was also noted that one longer-term goal for the SRTS program is to become more fully integrated into all related MnDOT processes. This would suggest that while a specific focus on SRTS may be justified in the near term, in order to promote the program and capitalize on other available resources and interest, the goal would be for the program to become more integrated into the general structure of the TAP over time.

5. **Serve a Transportation Purpose:** A major theme heard during outreach, also consistent with FHWA direction, is that the projects funded through the TAP should serve a transportation purpose as their primary function rather than a recreational purpose. For TAP purposes, “transportation purpose” is defined as primarily serving a commuting purpose and/or that connect two destination points; a facility may serve both a transportation purpose and a recreational purpose; a facility that connects people to recreational destinations may be considered to have a transportation purpose. The TAP solicitation process should be structured such that the projects selected meet this definition.

It was noted that there are recreation needs throughout the state. However, it was also noted that there are specific resources available to address these needs besides the general TAP solicitation process. These resources include the Recreational Trails Program – an optional component of the TAP which the State of Minnesota has been encouraged to participate in.

6. **Target Mid-Size Projects:** Another message heard through outreach was concern regarding project size on both ends of the spectrum. For large projects, the concern was that the overall size of Minnesota’s federal funding for TAP was too small to accommodate large projects while still maintaining elements of geographic and/or project diversity. It was noted that larger projects can be completed in smaller phases, if necessary. For smaller projects, the concern was that the additional project requirements associated with federal funding as well as the time associated with the application process made the project inefficient. Moving forward, the TAP should be structured to encourage projects within the appropriate size range - a recommended minimum of \$100K and a maximum of \$1 million.
7. **Preserve the Spirit of MAP-21:** A main goal of the federal transportation bill referred to as MAP-21, which provides TAP its funding, is programmatic streamlining. The bill combines a number of previously separate programs, each with their own funding source and selection process, into one program – the TAP. Fully integrating the eligible activities from each formerly independent program into one selection process (i.e. not retaining separate funding allocations) is most aligned with the spirit of the legislation. The overall structure for the TAP should push the general program and related selection process in this direction. This does not mean that the programs themselves must disappear, planning and coordination for these formerly independent programs can, and should, still occur throughout the state. However, when it comes to funding projects, the TAP can be one resource for which the eligible projects can compete.

The role of the Program Coordinators (i.e. Historic Structures, Scenic Byways, SRTS, and Historic Bridges) should continue as they serve vital functions in articulating program needs within an ATP. Most of the programs that are eligible for TAP funding have a plan in place; the programs that do not should develop a plan that articulates their needs for the state and within each ATP. The Program Coordinators should provide key expertise to applicants and recipients of TAP funding. Additionally, there is an expectation that the Program Coordinators attend the TAP selection meetings.

8. **Ensure Project Delivery:** In light of recent State legislation, the issue of TAP-type projects slipping from one STIP year to another, or out of the program entirely needs to be addressed through the overall structure for the program. When this issue was discussed during outreach, a number of reasons for these issues were identified. However, the most common cause noted was that projects were not adequately prepared at the time of application. Either they were not far enough along in the development process and/or the lead community was not sufficiently informed about the additional project requirements associated with federal funds. The overall structure for the TAP will include strategies that can mitigate these issues.

9. **Evaluate Program Processes and Outcomes:** Performance and evaluation are critical components of how MnDOT does business from planning through construction. To the extent possible, the performance evaluation will be incorporated into the overall structure for the TAP. This can help ensure that the structure put in place is producing the desired results (i.e. are the projects selected through the TAP solicitation consistent with the Statewide Program Outcome Objectives). Not only will this help inform project selection and process tweaks, but understanding what success for TAP looks like will help MnDOT and partners better communicate the role of the program in the state's transportation system.

Program Structure Recommendations

As noted in the outreach summary sections of this document, there were two key questions that needed to be answered to move forward with the development of the TAP. They were:

- What is the role of the formerly independent programs (i.e. SRTS, Scenic Byways, and Recreational Trails) in the TAP – should they receive separate funding allocations or all compete together?
- Should TAP projects be regionally selected (i.e. through the ATPs) or selected through a statewide competitive process?

Using the principles detailed in the previous section, the TAP working group put forth the following recommendations related to the questions identified above. Included with each recommendation is a brief explanation as to how the working group arrived at the recommendation and what it means going forward.

Recommendation 1: Funding remains together (with the exception of Recreational Trails); all eligible activities compete against one another in project selection process; some preference is given to specific eligible activities based on the statewide program outcome objectives.

TAP funding remains together rather than sub-allocating funding based on the formerly independent programs and/or eligible activities (with the exception of Recreational Trails). This recommendation is generally consistent with the **Preserve the Spirit of MAP-21** principle and helps work toward the **Ensure Application Streamlining** principle, as outlined in the previous section. Additionally, during outreach, concern was expressed about the efficiency and effectiveness of further sub-allocating an already small funding source – the TAP is anticipated to receive approximately 13 million per year. Furthermore, examples were given of projects that have previously been funded by the formerly independent programs that could have been also funded by other programs. This overlap, it was noted, lends itself to combination and streamlining.

While sub-allocation to the formerly independent programs is not recommended, it is recommended that a degree of preference be provided to projects that are part of the SRTS program. The SRTS program coordinator would have the final say as to whether a project qualified for the program. Historically, SRTS received approximately 15 percent of the funding that is now included within the TAP. It is recommended that a similar goal be included as part of the TAP project selection criteria in order to address the **Support Safe Routes to School** principle, as detailed in the previous section.

Recommendation 2: ATPs select TAP projects; project selection process is developed cooperatively between MnDOT and the ATPs – MnDOT will set a consistent application and solicitation cycle; the ATPs will individually develop project selection criteria based on guidance from the state.

Project selection process for the TAP should occur at the ATP level rather than the State level. Each ATP will receive an allocation of TAP funding based on population. This is consistent with the **Strengthen the Role of the ATP** principle. Additionally, it was noted during outreach that the majority of the funding now included in the TAP was from the Transportation Enhancements (TE) program (approx. 63%), which historically was an ATP-led process.

While, it is recommended that the ATPs are responsible for administering the TAP project selection process and ultimately making project selections, it is also recommended that the State is involved in the development of the selection process and criteria to ensure certain goals for both the process and outcomes are incorporated. MnDOT will set a consistent application and solicitation cycle; the ATPs will individually develop project selection criteria based on guidance from the state.

This recommendation helps to set the stage for addressing a number of the principles identified in the previous section, including **Ensure Application Streamlining, Promote Projects Identified in Statewide Plans, Support Safe Routes to School, Serve a Transportation Purpose, Target Small and Mid-Size Projects, Prevent Project Slippage, and Evaluate Program Processes and Outcomes**. The specifics of the project selection process should incorporate the main themes and goals of these principles in order to achieve both a process and outcomes that are consistent with federal and state legislation as well as the messages heard through outreach. Further documentation will be developed to address the specifics of the project selection process.

MnDOT Leadership Approval:

The outreach summary, program principles and formal recommendations outlined for TAP above were brought to MnDOT's senior leadership through the Transportation Program Investment Committee (TPIC) on September 3rd and approved.