Minnesota Freight Advisory Committee strategic planning work group
Results from interviews with MnDOT's District Engineers
April 30, 2015

Context

MFAC's strategic planning work group sought input from MnDOT's District Engineers regarding their understanding of freight transportation needs in their region, their familiarity with MFAC, and their thoughts on mechanisms to facilitate greater department understanding of shippers,' carriers,' and related industries' transportation needs and priorities.

Phone interviews were completed with MnDOT's eight District Engineers and/or members of their management team in the latter part of April, to address these topics as well as gather input on the related Manufacturers' Perspectives project. (The interview guide is attached at the bottom of this document.)

Key findings

Districts' familiarity with freight issues

All of the DEs said that they have at least some familiarity with freight shippers in their region, because

- The District has reached out to freight haulers to varying degrees, through visits, participation on regional transportation committees, construction conferences, public meetings related to construction projects, or larger MnDOT outreach projects and freight studies;
- The larger and more vocal shippers have reached out to MnDOT, such as when the system affects their business, (e.g., rough pavement for fragile freight) and/or the region (e.g., when the volume of natural resource freight being shipped increased substantially in northern Minnesota, infrastructure changes were needed so that freight and the general public could travel safely together).

However, DEs recognize that there may be significant gaps in their District's or MnDOT's understanding of freight needs, as a number of DEs said that they hear about issues, facility expansions, and other aspects of businesses' operations related to transportation, through happenstance. Several District Engineers said that what concerns them most regarding freight in their District is that, "I don't know what I don't know."

Several DEs said that they don't always know emerging changes in the market(s), for example:

- **Just-in-Time** In northwest Minnesota, some manufacturers are moving from JIT to maintaining a two-three day supply of input materials, as a response to inevitable weather constraints.
- **Agriculture** Some agriculture is transitioning from trucks to semis to adjust to the persistent driver shortage. Other countries' bans on GMO crops dictates how non-GMO commodities are shipped – trucks drive these products instead of sending them by rail or barge.
- **Energy** Changes in the energy sector had significant impacts that are still cascading through the transportation system, with railroads essentially becoming mobile pipelines.

Other "gap" areas mentioned include:

- **Specific infrastructure needs** Knowing how pavement condition affects business' decisions related to routing e.g., for fragile products, and the other considerations that determine whether particular businesses deviate from their otherwise-preferred routes
- **Peak periods** Knowing which plants have a significant number of staff, or large volumes of inputs or products, arriving or leaving in shifts, and whether the infrastructure supports those staff and truck transitions safely
- **Given hours-of-service restrictions**, evaluating the importance of MnDOT's Safe Rest Areas for drivers. How have freight haulers been adjusting and changing their operations to accommodate the restrictions, and how are MnDOT's policies and practices aligning with these changes?
- **Modal shifts** Understanding how the effect of bottlenecks in one mode (rail) ultimately affects the other modes. For example, one DE described that when rail became unavailable for several weeks, 500 new truckloads of limestone were moving through his District every day, which affects highway safety and durability, and should inform project design in the long run.
- **Impacts on the general public** Better understanding how freight movement affects and changes the choices of other roadway users. One DE provided the example of ambulances not wanting to use a particular route heavily used by timber haulers during winter, because of safety concerns. When the District learned about this, they upgraded the road to 10 tons, consistent with the adjacent District, and added shoulders to better accommodate the freight, providing a safer environment for all vehicles.
- **Economic impacts** Better understanding the economic impacts of road closures (for weather events) to various industry segments. Several DEs pointed out that specific sectors, such as food processing, run 24/7. When roads are closed, that's time that can't be recovered. As one DE put it, "What is the economic impact on individual producers along given routes, and how should that inform our investment decisions regarding infrastructure and snow-and-ice operations?"

Familiarity with MFAC

All of the DEs had heard of MFAC, but many did not know a lot about the purpose; and they indicated that they had little interaction with the committee and their work products.

Feedback on MFAC's purpose and direction

- **Guide investment priorities** Given that MnDOT is focused on system preservation and not expansion, have a process to gather input on freight priorities for preservation investments, as well as input regarding priorities for filling the "gaps."
- **Involve the Districts** Information or results from statewide MFAC meetings that would inform Districts' work (planning, operations, communications, etc.) need to be regularly disseminated to the Districts, in a way that DEs perceive has not been done. One DE said, "It would bother me if there was feedback about my District wasn't getting back to me."
- **Discuss new methods** MnDOT could provide information on newer infrastructure and traffic management tools, e.g., roundabouts, to answer questions such as why and where they are

needed, how they are designed, and also to hear from MFAC members about concerns or considerations particular to freight.

- **Gather participants' feedback on MnDOT processes**, such as construction planning and communication, permitting, weight restrictions, etc., to learn about specific problems experienced by users that the department may be able to address through process or policy improvement. And, as one DE noted, MFAC members themselves may often have the expertise to suggest practical responses to these concerns that MnDOT could consider, such as logistical improvements regarding road closures for construction.

  A general theme articulated by DEs was that a successful re-purposing of MFAC would result in changes in District planning, programming, and operations, informed by MFAC member input.

- **Provide industry trend information** MFAC members should be asked to provide information on industry trends, particularly anticipated disruptions, and how freight haulers think that will affect transportation.
- **Evaluate transportation's/MnDOT's economic impact** Understand how MFAC members evaluate MnDOT's program from an economic vitality/development perspective. Part of MFAC's purpose is to represent and articulate the relationship between transportation and economic vitality, externally, and also to help MnDOT staff (beyond OFCVO) better understand this connection in real terms, so that the department can articulate this story as well.
- **Focus on both the big picture and specific issues** The statewide MFAC should focus on the high-level, big picture questions and dialogue that will inform MnDOT's long-term planning and investments (with regional groups providing input on region- and industry-specific issues).

Feedback on regional FACs

Several DEs cautioned that development of regional MFACs, and the re-purposing of the current statewide committee must be largely informed by MFAC members themselves – what benefit do they derive from their participation, how can that be enhanced; and what do they want to contribute so that the system better serves all Minnesotans?

Structure and process

- One DE suggested that instead of developing regional committees, perhaps **organize around major commodities and products**, to fully understand this segment:
  - How they use the system,
  - What they need from it,
  - How they move throughout the state (routes and modes),
  - Where they find bottlenecks, etc.

  For example, one DE pointed out that LTL freight is likely more sensitive to road quality.
- Another DE suggested that the **structure can be analogous to TZD**, in having local participants with local knowledge of issues and priorities, with a statewide roll-up.

- Another model suggested is that MFAC meetings continue their statewide focus but be held regionally through **video conference at MnDOT HQs** in the eight Districts, to strengthen connections between the Districts and their respective constituents.
- Regional committees also could be **organized by corridor**, such as heavy users of 94 and 10; or, by mode, and then scheduled around the state at various modal centers (e.g., ports).
- Another option suggested is to have MFAC-sponsored **task forces around complex issues** that could best be addressed by a smaller group of MFAC and DOT staff (from across department program areas and offices) working together.
- Consider how statewide and/or regional committees complement the **Freight Symposium**.
- **Regional differences** DEs pointed out the distinctions between moving freight through Greater Minnesota and through the Metro area, and the challenges inherent in both – and that this could be another way to focus conversations.
- Regional and statewide committees should **roll up** so that recommendations are unified and address state needs as a whole.

Content

- The purpose, and benefits, to volunteer participants has to be very clear. DEs suggested **focusing each meeting on a timely industry-specific issue**, such as:
    - Transportation issues, such as congestion, auto-driving vehicles;
    - A policy, such as weight restrictions and industry adjustments to them across states; or
    - Revisiting aspects of system planning. For example, one DE suggested that MFAC could review the IRC system, in light of how their markets have shifted since the IRC was developed. This could include subsequent changes in the county road system, and participants could discuss how MnDOT can adjust its system to accommodate these changes.
- Others suggested discussing **construction/maintenance plans in the STIP timeframe**, to gather input on potential adjustments, discuss impacts and mitigations, etc.
- DEs acknowledged the value in itself of providing a space to **build relationships and two-way communication** between MnDOT staff and this system user group. One DE said that, in general, "the right conversations need to happen to initiate a problem-solving activity." MFAC can provide opportunity for these conversations to take place.

  For example, several DEs raised the issue of weight limits, of concern to shippers statewide. One DE thought that perhaps the department does not have a full understanding of freight shippers' needs for higher weight limits, and that in understanding the particulars of those needs better, MnDOT and MFAC could develop potential solutions, such as spot improvements on key roadway segments. That is, MFAC provides a way for MnDOT to go beyond saying, "No." Another DE referenced a study that OFCVO did several years ago on 96K-lb. trucks. The DE suggested, given the higher legal limits in surrounding states, the chronic driver shortage, and MnDOT's aim to support Minnesota's economic competitiveness, that perhaps the department/MFAC could review this issue again.

MnDOT Freight development (MFAC and MP project)
District Engineer interview guide

MFAC

1. How would you assess your District's and relevant MnDOT offices' understanding of freight shippers' needs in your District? What is working well, and how did that come to be? What would you like to know more about?

2. In general, to what extent do you think MnDOT needs to understand, incorporate freight shippers' system needs in our planning processes and operational decisions? How well do you think that is happening? How do you know? What are some areas for improvement?

3. How familiar are you with the Minnesota Freight Advisory Committee? Have you been to any meetings? What do you think are the benefits/potential benefits of having a freight advisory committee?

4. MFAC is largely TC-Metro-based. What are some ways to involve Greater Minnesota freight shippers in MnDOT's planning processes, decision-making?

5. What do you think the benefits would be of having regionally-based MFAC committees, to accommodate regional differences? To what extent do regional differences, that could be reflected by locally-based freight shippers, make a difference now in District/Department decision-making?

6. What specific kinds of regular or scheduled input from shippers and carriers would be helpful to you/your District, through an advisory committee or other mechanism? What topics do you think would be of mutual interest in an MFAC-type forum?

Manufacturers' Perspectives project

1. How do you think the MP project has helped/will be helpful/could be helpful to your District and to the department?

2. So far, due to resource constraints, the MP project is being implemented District-by-District. Is that alright? In what ways could the project benefit your District before a full project is undertaken? That is, are there smaller-scale ways that the project can be helpful?

3. Based on what you know about the project, what other types of information do you think we should be gathering, other activities we should be engaging in?

What else, regarding regional freight needs, should staff for either of these efforts take into consideration?

For more information

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