

20 Years and the RTP

Recently, I celebrated my 20th anniversary as an employee of the PVPC. Over this span, I have had the opportunity to work on a variety of interesting projects. If I were asked to pick my favorite project, it would be very difficult to choose just one, however, if you were to ask me to identify my most challenging project, without a doubt it would be the development of the Regional Transportation Plan or RTP. You see, the RTP is never truly “finished” in the traditional sense. As a result, it can at times become my own personal white whale. PVPC has completed six updates to the RTP since 1993 and this year, we began work on the seventh.

In short, the RTP is a federal requirement that outlines the direction of transportation planning over a minimum of twenty years. The RTP is currently updated every four years and provides the foundation for transportation improvement projects funded through the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and planning studies funded through the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP). If a project is not included in the RTP, it cannot be advanced through the UPWP or TIP. In the Pioneer Valley region, major improvement projects such as the widening of the Route 9 Calvin Coolidge Bridge between Northampton and Hadley, the Great River Bridge in Westfield, the Holyoke Transportation Center, miles of bikepaths, the ongoing construction at Union Station in Springfield, and the return of passenger rail service to the Knowledge Corridor Line all advanced through a conforming RTP.

It’s actually all about conformity. In order to advance transportation improvement projects, it must be first demonstrated that sufficient financial resources exist to fund the project. This is done in consultation with federal and state officials, but also requires input at the local level as well. A robust public participation plan is an important component of the development of the RTP as is the demonstration of equity across all transportation modes. The RTP must also demonstrate that national transportation goals to enhance safety, reduce congestion, and protect the environment are addressed through the implementation of the plan.

The current update to the RTP will focus on incorporating the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century or MAP-21 legislation into the plan. MAP-21

was signed into law in July, 2012 to create a performance based surface transportation program. As part of this RTP, we will be developing a number of regional performance measures to track our progress in meeting a series of transportation related targets. Performance based planning is not a new concept. We have been tracking the performance of our regional transportation system for many years through our regional traffic counting program, pavement management system, Top 100 High Crash Intersection lists, and PVTA ridership surveys. MAP-21 just takes this work to the next level by requiring targets to assist in the advancement of the goals of the RTP. One example of a potential regional target could be to increase the percentage of roadways that fall into the "good or excellent" category by 5% by 2020. The transportation section has focused on the development of a new set of criteria to rank potential new transportation improvement projects that advance the goals of the RTP and assist in meeting future regional performance measures.

Ultimately, the RTP is the region's blueprint to maintaining a safe and efficient transportation system for all modes of travel. Integration of the national goals and emphasis areas ensures access to federal transportation dollars to assist in the implementation of the plan. We have a large and diverse region and planning to meet its transportation needs can be quite challenging.

Over the next few months, PVPC will begin unveiling draft versions of the RTP for public review and comment. This process began in October and November of this year through the development of several focus groups to assist in the development of regional needs and strategies. It is anticipated that a short video will be ready early in 2015 to give a brief overview of the RTP, while the draft document is currently scheduled to be released sometime in May. All of this information will be available through the PVPC website. Your comments will be important to help develop a regional transportation plan that continues to meet the transportation needs of the Pioneer Valley region.