

Improving and Reforming our Nation's Surface Transportation Programs:  
Central Florida Field Hearing

U. S. House of Representatives

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Congressman John L. Mica, Chairman

Testimony of Randy M. Whitfield, P.E., Director

Palm Beach Metropolitan Planning Organization

Chairman Mica and Members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify at this hearing in consideration of the next Surface Transportation Bill that will provide direction in planning and implementing the transportation requirements to support the economy and mobility of the nation.

I would like to address several points today related to transportation funding, the need for flexibility in meeting transportation demands and the process involved in providing mobility for people and goods.

Transportation funding is currently divided among a number of programs that have associated guidelines and requirements limiting the use of those particular funds. The multiplicity of these programs requires extensive administration and knowledge to determine what is available for a particular project, does it qualify within a particular program and what do I have to do for the funds. Funding for transportation should be streamlined into a few funding programs that have flexibility and can be applied to a wider range of projects involving maintenance and capacity increases. There should be a floor for these programs to ensure funding is available for all modes. There should be some level of transferability among the programs at lower levels to address local needs. The ability to leverage these funds in partnership with the private sector needs to be encouraged and expanded. One approach could be the use of incentives for the private sector funds and the availability of funds through Infrastructure Banks or similar mechanisms.

Maintenance and operation of the transportation system is an important consideration today and in the future. The American Society of Engineers has given the transportation system components grades ranging from C- to D- for conditions of the

bridges, roads and transit. Preservation of the current system must be a priority. Funding for major capital projects is limited as is the land needed for major expansions. Improved efficiency in using this system is important. National research into technology should be continued to find and develop ways to operate the transportation system safely and more efficiently. Intelligent Transportation System solutions such as the I-95 Managed Lanes and a regional transit Smartcard in South Florida will play a larger role in providing mobility for the movement of people and goods.

To fund these streamlined programs, a reliable, predictable funding mechanism is needed. The gas tax has served the country well over the years but no longer provides an adequate revenue stream to meet current and future needs. Increased vehicle efficiency and use of alternative fuels and energy sources is good for the environment and national goals for reducing dependency on foreign sources but transportation revenues are reduced. In addition, users of alternative energy sources are not paying a fair share of impacts to the transportation infrastructure caused by vehicle use. A different funding mechanism is needed to ensure all users of the transportation system contribute to the programs and provide adequate funding to construct, operate and maintain the transportation system.

How do you provide transportation using these funds and implement the needed projects to provide capacity and use the system efficiently? This requires a balancing act between local needs and regional objectives. The Miami Urbanized Area is roughly 100 miles long and 20 miles wide with a population of 5.5 million. Within this area are a number of culturally diverse groups with different life styles and desires for quality of life. At the same time, there are economic interests and goals to be achieved as a region. To address the local and regional transportation needs for these various interests, the area continued to maintain the three existing MPOs and created a Transportation Council with MPO representatives for regional mobility concerns and to perform regional planning tasks. Some of these tasks included partnerships with FDOT in performing a Regional Freight Study, a passenger rail feasibility study serving multiple city centers, and a Regional Long Range Multimodal Transportation Plan. These types of coalitions of the MPOs and transportation service providers have been created in most other large urban areas in Florida. They are balancing the local and regional aspects of transportation services with the flexibility inherent in makeup of the MPOs and councils. In time, these structures may evolve into more regional entities to remain competitive in the national economy.

Accountability is an issue that should be part of the process for providing transportation. Performance measures can play a major role in meeting transportation objectives and demonstrating to the public how funds are making a difference. These performance measures must be related to the overall goals and be able to show progress toward

meeting the goals. They should be meaningful, easy to measure, and easy to understand.

An area to apply performance measures to show improvement is project delivery. This is an area that continues to need streamlining in the various phases of project development. Opportunities exist to expedite review of plans, environmental impact analyses, right-of-way acquisition, and project approval. As an example, the phase involving environmental reviews is necessary, but can take a significant amount of time. Florida has implemented the Efficient Transportation Decision-Making process that affords an opportunity for review by all agencies at the same time. There are agreements with the reviewing agencies committing them to project review within a specified time period. Any problem areas are identified early on so resolution can begin sooner. This process results in reductions in the review time and documentation which moves forward with the project. All phases of project development should be reviewed to implement streamlining opportunities and expedite project delivery.

In summary, the national transportation system is a key element of the economy and life style for U S citizens. This system needs to be repaired, preserved and expanded to meet today's needs and tomorrow's demands. We need a simpler system to fund the program, flexibility to address the needs, a fair system of funding, decision-making where the demands occur and the ability to respond to the needs quickly.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.