

**Mid-Columbia Economic Development District
Connect Mid-Columbia 2021 Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, August 18, 2021, Via Zoom**

Attendance: Bill Bauman (Mobility Coordinator- Community in Motion), Dustin Nilsen (Director Planning, City of HR), Dale Robins (SWWA RTC), Donna Mickley (USFS), Jonathan Lewis (Klickitat Valley Health & Chambers of Commerce), Kathy Schwartz (Wasco Co Commissioner), Gordon Zimmerman (Cascade Locks Administrator), Kevin Greenwood (Port of Hood River), Leana Kinley (Administrator City of Stevenson), Matt Ransom (Director SWWA RTC), Dr. Marta Cronin (CGCC), Tammara Tippel (Mt. Adams Chamber), Margie Ziegler (Port of Klickitat), Patty Fink (Columbia Area Transit), Terra Lingley (ODOT Historic Highway), Theresa Conley (ODOT Region 4), Tyler Stone (Wasco Co. Administrator), Brad Dehart (ODOT Region 4), Lynn Burditt (Community Volunteer), Richard Foster (Klickitat County Economic Development), Rodger Nichols (Gorge Commissioner), Scott Hege (Wasco Co Commissioner), Steve Kramer (Wasco Co Commissioner), Lisa Naas Cook (Gorge Commission staff), Dale McCabe (City Engineer- City The Dalles), Alice Cannon (City of The Dalles), Valerie Egon (ODOT Region 1), Genevieve Scholl (Port of Hood River)

MCEDD Staff: Jessica Metta (Executive Director), Kathy Fitzpatrick (Mobility Manager), Kate Drennan (Deputy Director Transportation), Jill Brandt (Admin Assistant)

Introductions

Meeting called to order at 8:30. A round of introductions took place.

Review Purpose/Intent; Process Overview

Jessica Metta shared the meeting's purpose to enhance the region's Five-Year Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) currently being drafted, specifically the Transportation action plan. In many cases projects need to be identified in a CEDS process to be eligible for federal funding. Historically MCEDD's involvement with regional transportation began back in 2010 with the staffing and coordination of the Gorge Translink Alliance by MCEDD's Mobility Manager. Over its decade in existence, the Translink Alliance has brought the five area transit providers together with social services, held transportation summits and other initiatives connecting economic development with transportation and helped to bring solutions to the transportation issues and goals identified by communities within the Gorge. Transportation is a vital connector to economic development, and MCEDD's goal is to have regional economic development priorities advised by the region's transportation needs. This Connect Mid-Columbia series of conversations is important for the region to coordinate issues of transportation for economic development and to come up with strategies that will move both local and regional priorities forward. Jessica asked for other priorities for Connect Mid-Columbia from the attendees.

Discussion: Genevieve Scholl stated a desire for legislative advocacy to move forward prioritized projects (including funding requests and/or policy changes).

Regional Strategy Current Status re: Transportation

Jessica shared the current CEDS draft vision statement: “The Gorge as a resilient, thriving, sustainable, rural economy that supports equitable access to diverse business opportunities that act in harmony with the area’s unique qualities, values, cultural and natural resources.” The four goal areas are Strong Businesses, Robust Workforce, Resilient Infrastructure, and Powerful Regional Collaboration. The themes for equitable outcomes and resiliency have been included throughout this CEDS process. Transportation falls under the Resilient Infrastructure goal.

Jessica shared the Transportation Action Plan in the 2017 CEDS and noted progress towards the outcomes:

- Oregon House Bill 2017 -- funded many transit and other transportation projects.
- FLAP funding -- funded HCRH trail construction, dog mountain access, Columbia Gorge Express.
- Explored truck parking options - new private businesses in Sherman County opened to meet this need.
- All the Columbia River crossings have had funding awarded.
- Improvements at area Cruise docks and airports were funded.
- Public transportation investments have really changed the transit system with fixed routes added and seamless transfers improved with the Gorge Pass.
- Bike and pedestrian improvements have been funded.
- HCRH improvements included new Summit Creek Viaduct completed, Mitchell Point tunnel (currently under construction), Viento to Mitchell Point trail along HCRH scheduled to begin next year.

Discussion: Patty Fink endorsed the CEDS process, appreciating the new area transportation connections that the high levels of funding in our area have allowed to blossom over the past few years. Kathy Fitzpatrick agreed that the most popular regional planning projects for transportation also align with local communities’ transportation priorities. Safe routes to schools, improving bike and pedestrian infrastructure in conjunction with City of Hood River, Dog Mountain trailhead access are all projects where regional need has aligned with local need.

Jessica Metta explained that in addition to the full five-year update, the CEDS priority list of projects is also updated annually. The most recent list completed in March 2021 included the several transportation projects shared on a slide.

Proposed Regional Strategy Updates re: Transportation

Jessica shared the existing sub-goal for transportation action plan: “Provide safe and efficient regional transport system to enhance the communities and businesses of the Gorge.” To brainstorm strategies for plan, first assets and challenges need to be considered. Regional assets already identified are: Interstates and Highways, Airports, Rail Service, River Access (Barge transportation), Bike and Pedestrian and Transit Systems. No other assets were noted.

Challenges already identified are: aging infrastructure (staying on top of maintenance), business development, constrained financial resources (create need to coordinate and prioritize), limited

passenger rail options, growth and congestion from tourism, gaps in vehicle, bike and pedestrian transportation systems, safety concerns (congestions and aging infrastructure), rural dispersed nature of region (long commutes) created by housing constraints and emergency preparedness. Jessica asked for additional challenges to note.

Discussion: Dustin Nilsen said a disparity arises when the region relies on locally funded projects. He cited Hood River as an example with its three interstate exchange upgrades. These upgrades serve the regional system as well as local needs. The disparity arises in balancing the impact of the local costs for improvements against the impact for the regional need. We all share need for I84. SR14 on WA side is similar on big ticket local impacts of regional improvements.

Kathy Fitzgerald observed that equity is not included, although it is addressed by bullet points. Safety concerns is bullet point, and it would be appropriate to add equity concerns. Long commutes fall within the challenges as an equity issue. Kathy noted that equity is a concern that comes up often in meetings.

Brad Dehart added that including need for continuing to modernize our transportation system (electric vehicle charging stations) is a challenge. Jonathan Lewis added that the federal government wants to make an investment in potential alternative fuels for transportation. Dustin Nilsen expressed concern for transportation funding in the future as transportation shifts to gas alternatives. He noted the contradiction that we both rely on gas taxes and continue to invest in vehicles that don't use gas, so that the goals of fuel efficiency are at odds with the need to fund infrastructure improvements.

Alice Cannon noted that good transportation feeds into the priority of filling available jobs. The area needs workers but has no available housing. Commuting is a partial solution that will help ameliorate but not solve this problem.

Lisa Naas Cook asked how the risk from extreme weather events, emergency preparedness, and the nexus with climate change is characterized. Jessica responded that how the system acts during disaster events could be spelled out. Dale Robins pointed out that resiliency is vital because alternate routes in the Gorge when there is an emergency are limited.

Jessica asked the group for suggestions on wordsmithing the specific transportation infrastructure goal. Kate Drennan noted that we can add resiliency into the goal statement.

Jessica asked for brainstorming of strategies, urging the group to think regionally. What actions over the next five years do we need to do to address our region's transportation needs? This document will help us advocate for the region over multiple jurisdictions.

Discussion: Dustin agrees weather or natural disaster preparedness is important. Impacts will continue and need to be planned for, including the reliability of our transportation systems to mitigate these problems, specifically the ability to evacuate in emergencies. Jonathan Lewis

asked about alignment between this plan and the regional hazard mitigation plans done by the counties. Dustin offered to send the Hood River County plan to Jessica. Jonathan Lewis offered to send Klickitat County's Plan. Wasco County also has a plan.

Kathy Schwartz asked to add a statement about improved safety of the transportation network, specifically the safety and security of passengers. Anti-bias training for staff, training for staff on how to handle emergencies. She gave as an example what has happened to public transit in Portland as an incentive for our region to improve on safety - not only in crashes, but personal safety of passengers. Jonathan Lewis added training for staff operating public transit vehicles on how to respond to violence in a safe and effective manner.

Gordon Zimmerman brought up electric vehicles transportation. The Hood River County Energy Council is working on electric infrastructure and other utility infrastructure to support future needs. He noted that our current electric distribution systems are not capable of handling the increased power demand that the new vehicles will bring. We must support upgrades in the electric infrastructure in order to support upgrades to transportation.

Kate Drennan spoke to the goal for improved coordination around the region between public and private entities. Leana Kinley agreed that each community is different with different needs and priorities, but we all must work together. Genevieve Scholl added that we must work together not only within our region, but also with folks outside of MCEDD's Region. She cited as an example the Clackamas County side of Mt. Hood where Hwy 35 and 26 meet. This area is not within our region but borders it and affects our region. Patty Fink added that the collaborative approach to border issues would be preferable with Eastern Multnomah County. Solutions for the region there are either to push the problems our way, or to work on them together. Working on them together can provide a solution that is acceptable for all and can help to facilitate economic development in some communities in the Gorge. For example, instead of locating a new parking at Ainsworth exit, look at opportunities to bring folks into Cascade Locks to park, where they can also shop and hike. Patty added that projects that would help address some of these challenges fall under advocacy, not necessarily construction.

Alice Cannon stated that the Gorge Pass concept is a wonderful thought. We should keep enhancing it, particularly for those commuting here in winter months. Alice advocated for continuing transit coordination with rail service, Greyhound and all area transit providers to get workers to jobs.

Dustin Nilsen agreed that the alignment of transportation efforts with local community initiatives is a forward positive step. He noted that the Gorge Pass lines up with downtown parking strategies in Hood River, allowing workers access without taking up parking. He added that the challenge is to understand how the little pieces and opportunities support larger regional transit goals.

Patty Fink added that a parking management system in the Gorge that could address both parking in small communities and at trailheads would be beneficial. Folks can be notified when there is no more parking available and go somewhere else. Parking could be coordinated with shuttle service so that vehicles don't have to come into the gorge.

Alice Cannon noted that partners should include Business Oregon and Governor Brown's Regional Solutions Team.

Developing Project Lists

Jessica presented the suggested Prioritization Criteria that will be used to rank projects at the next meeting. These include:

- Connected to CEDS.
- Community Ranking.
- Economic Impact.
- Regional significance/impact.
- Geographic disbursement.
- Potential availability of funding sources.
- Readiness to proceed.

Jessica urged the group to think about upcoming funding opportunities and projects we want to make sure are on this list. She noted the big possible infrastructure package coming this year. In addition to projects in our annual CEDS update, the group should identify other transportation plans to consult for projects.

Discussion: Dale Robbins said both WSDOT and ODOT have priority transportation lists. These are mostly focused on preservation and maintenance of our existing systems.

Dustin agreed with the prioritization categories and added that economic values versus readiness are different concepts and that considering both aspects is important. Patty Fink suggested adding looking towards future with what we are building as a criterion, specifically building towards something different and new than we have had in the past. Jonathan Lewis pointed out that equity and resilience have come up in the meeting but are not captured here. Lisa Naas Cook thought that equity and resilience were implied as those themes are embedded into CEDS strategies. Patty stated that it is CAT's intention to plan for and build resilience into the future.

Upcoming Funding Opportunities

Jessica will incorporate these suggestions into the prioritization categories. She asked the group to identify and highlight any funding opportunities coming up besides infrastructure package.

Discussion: Brad Dehart mentioned the Connect Oregon funding, for aviation, marine, and rail projects. There have been projects funded under this program in this region. The program is a grant funding opportunity with a competitive application process. Applications will be received

until the middle of September. The link was shared:

<https://www.oregon.gov/odot/programs/pages/connectoregon.aspx>

Dale Robins stated that the RTC includes a list of grants and programs available for WA. He noted it looks like earmarks are coming back to Congress. Matt Ransom added that WA partners are aware that WA legislature is debating a new transportation spending bill. He added that members participating in the group from Hood River may pursue an earmark with WA for the bridge replacement. He added that there may be a new spending bill that will expand existing programs like safe routes to school. This could be a good opportunity for WA side improvements.

Genevieve Scholl commented on the disparity in the two states between the mileage tax on one side of the river versus the gas tax on the other side. She added that truckers use our aging bridges to avoid the gas tax on one side and the mileage tax on the other.

Kevin Greenwood noted that local government needs to be vigilant on how the state will develop its program to use the federal infrastructure package funding to be sure that specific local projects are included.

Follow-Up

Jessica wrapped up the discussion with a reminder that the next session is planned for Sept 22nd at 8:30am. She will update the challenges with the input from today's discussion. She will also share the draft strategies that have been identified today. Everyone is asked to send top priorities to Jessica to help compile list and to email her with anyone else to invite to the next session.

Meeting adjourned at 9:55 am.

Respectfully submitted by Jill Brandt, Administrative Assistant