

Remarks from Matt Day, President of North Carolina Association of Rural Planning Organizations, and Chris Lukasina, President of the North Carolina Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, to the NC FIRST Commission, May 3, 2019

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the Commission this morning. We represent the 18 Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and 18 Rural Planning Organizations (RPOs) across North Carolina. MPOs are established under Federal law, and serve urban areas with populations over 50,000 and the surrounding areas that are expected to become urban in the near future. RPOs are established under State law, and serve all areas of the state that are outside of the MPOs. MPOs and RPOs provide a number of transportation planning services at the regional level, including:

- Development of long-range transportation plans (Comprehensive Transportation Plans, Metropolitan Transportation Plans, Area/Corridor Studies, Bicycle/Pedestrian Plans, Transit Plans, etc.)
- Prioritization of projects through the Strategic Transportation Investments (STI) process
- Development of a Transportation Improvement Program (MPOs only)
- Participation in project development activities on funded projects
- Sharing information and serving as a liaison between local governments and NCDOT
- Serving as a forum for public involvement in transportation decision making

One of the things that we often hear in the media and on the street is the idea that there is an “urban/rural divide.” While there are certainly differences between the needs in urban communities and rural communities, there is actually a great deal of commonality between the two. We see many opportunities for collaboration between MPOs and RPOs on these common issues, and we would prefer to focus on these commonalities rather than the issues that divide us.

MPOs and RPOs already work together on a number of regional and statewide initiatives and committees, and we are committed to continuing this collaboration. We also see a number of opportunities for cooperation between urban areas and rural areas on issues such as:

- Coordination on project submittals to the STI prioritization process and the sharing of local input points in that process
- Joint plans that span MPO/RPO boundaries
- Working collaboratively on individual projects that span MPO/RPO boundaries

It is important to note that when discussing MPOs and RPOs there are fuzzy distinctions between these planning boundaries and what we typically think of as urban and rural areas. While MPOs are primarily urban and RPOs are primarily rural, there are some relatively large communities located in RPOs that face issues typically thought of as urban (such as congestion and transit needs) and there are some small communities on the outer edges of MPOs that are primarily facing rural issues and needs. There is also a fuzzy distinction when discussing urban projects and rural projects, since the benefits of projects often extend far beyond the immediate project area. As an example, the East End Connector project in Durham is an urban project, but it also provides a major benefit to travelers from rural Granville County by improving their connection to the rest of the Triangle region.

MPOs and RPOs across the state are facing some major challenges. One that we all face is the competition for limited funding available through the STI process. The difficulty of this competition

varies widely across the state depending on the Division and Region where the MPO/RPO is located. We are committed to working with NCDOT to ensure that MPOs and RPOs are being strategic and submitting the best projects possible for consideration in STI to make this competition as fair as it can be within the STI framework.

Another challenge is the need to make improvements to long corridors that pass through multiple urban and rural communities. These long corridors provide the necessary connections between urban communities, rural communities, ports, logistics hubs, healthcare facilities, and job centers. Not only is it necessary to work together on planning for these corridors, but it also necessary to cooperate on implementation of projects to make the necessary improvements on these corridors.

An additional challenge is identifying ways to fund and build the types of projects that may not traditionally do well through the STI scoring process. This includes projects such as modernization of substandard roads, small projects of local importance, economic development-related improvements, and multimodal projects. We are working within the STI framework to address some of these challenges, but may need to consider additional creative solutions.

As the Commission can see many of the major transportation challenges facing North Carolina are very similar through the state, regardless of area type.

The transportation challenges of today and tomorrow are many. Currently anticipated resources may not be enough to meet future needs that will result from population and congestion growth that are far outpacing currently available resources. Funding levels in all areas continue to fall short of identified needs and new solutions for transportation issues are challenging or funding paradigms, up to and including preventing creative, effective solutions from being implemented.

The Strategic Transportation Investment (STI) program as well as additional funding through HB 97 have demonstrated our State's transportation sector can use a transparent, needs based, data driven approach to identify the most cost-effective transportation investments in the state. We should continue to identify projects and programs where the needs are the greatest and all revenue options should be looked at to meet our growing transportation needs. To do this we need to secure new dependable transportation funding that can be used in a flexible manner that will support the diverse needs of the state at all levels in the most cost-effective manner.

From long range planning to ribbon cutting, we have begun to deal with our state's transportation needs by taking a performance-based approach. We should also constantly review what the State's transportation priorities are. Best practices from other states and even other countries may provide guidance for continued improvement in North Carolina.

We can identify other tools that can help where transportation is not the focus, such as economic development. For example, Minnesota's Transportation Economic Development (TED) program (<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/funding/ted/index.html>) was created to help in an area where transportation was a contributing part of the solution. The TED program is a competitive, data driven program to identify transportation improvements that are geared toward economic development, particularly in rural areas. The program has project selection criteria designed by the Department of

Commerce and project implementation is administered by the Department of Transportation. A NC TED program could be focused on key industry sectors that best align with NC's economic development goals.

Our state also has a variety of societal changes that have an impact on transportation planning. One such change is demographic change. Increasing growth rates in metro areas, aging and diversifying populations and encroaching urban/suburbanization in some critical areas are all demographic changes that Affects issues such as the ability to keep up with infrastructure/service needs in all modes, changing priorities, and social equity.

Economic changes also have a big impact on transportation. Our state's economy continues to grow into the digital and service sectors. There are increasing pressures and reliance on our state's freight network & logistics chains. The economic engines at all levels across the state are becoming the focus. Each of these has an impact on transportation connectivity and access needs. Understanding travelsheds/commutesheds becomes more and more important.

System resiliency is also an important change from the status quo. The need to maintain key nodes and links in the transportation network, both urban and rural, has only been amplified in recent years. Our ability to respond to and ultimately recover from natural disasters such as floods and landslides is directly related to our ability to maintain these nodes. Parts of the state with good resiliency have fared well. Those with a lack of good alternatives when key nodes are no longer accessible do not.

But resiliency is not just about hazard mitigation. As the transportation network evolves and ages, maintenance & operations needs will increase. We will see "Fortify" type projects more often and at an increasing rate in the future. System resiliency affects maintenance and modernization needs. Connectivity and redundancy needs are amplified as well.

A fourth societal change is emerging technology. Things like electric vehicles, connected/autonomous vehicles, and the smart grid are already starting in North Carolina. We need to get ahead of innovations such as communitywide Intelligent Transportation Systems and other smart infrastructure to ensure that they are "open source" infrastructure investments that are versatile and can evolve to meet our changing needs. We have a growing understanding of the timing and impact on mobility and safety. Backbone investments are the key in the short term.

Another emerging technology trend that impacts transportation is Teleworking/Telecommuting. This type of work environment continues to increase in urban areas, but congestion "benefits" are overshadowed by growth. To help with this trend sustained investment in broadband infrastructure is needed and expanding mobility services, such as ridesharing apps, scooters, bikeshare, and autonomous transit, will also be required. These are already in our urban areas but as they expand to other parts of our state we will need to make sure our policy and regulatory environment isn't playing catch up.

One final example of an emerging technology that is showing great promise but does not quite fit perfectly into our current transportation paradigm is managed roadways. Managed roadways are a multi-faceted solution that involves communications systems, control systems, and optimization strategies on the regional freeway network. These systems can significantly reduce delay and increase reliability. They are much cheaper than adding additional lanes and can be used in conjunction with managed lanes, toll facilities, and future widening. Managed roadways work through a combination of

lane management (variable speed limits, lane control, shoulder running, pricing), incident detection and CCTV surveillance, integrated sensors along freeway and surface streets collecting high resolution data, traveler information, and ramp improvements to handle additional queuing.

By synchronizes flow of vehicles entering a freeway to available capacity on the freeway we can better manage the available capacity. These systems provide real time demand management to manage traffic. Interchanges coordinate with one another to prevent excessive wait times and queuing for all interchanges, metering rates differ for each ramp and in the future these systems will provide for infrastructure to vehicle communications.

The first examples of managed freeways are being planned in the Research Triangle region. STIP projects I-6006 and I-6101 will cover most of the freeway network in the Triangle and are expected to be operating by 2025 and 2027 respectively.

As you can see there are lot of transportation challenges coming. Maintaining funding levels and mechanisms will not be enough. We need to find new and flexible funding to meet these challenges. Matt Day and I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.