

Final Report

Transportation Priorities Project II

TWC Project #03-131

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Transportation Priorities Project II

Dream It, Fund It, Build It

Located in southwest Washington in an elbow of the Columbia River, Clark County is part of the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan region. The county includes seven incorporated cities and 627 square miles. Over the last 20 years or so, its population has nearly doubled, growing from 192,000 residents in 1980 to 383,000 people today. More residents have meant greater demands on the transportation system and increased congestion, travel times, costs, and stress.

Identity Clark County (ICC) is a private, non-profit organization whose mission is community and economic development as it pertains to the economic health of Clark County. Emphasis is on transportation planning and funding, legislative issues that impact Clark County's ability to attract jobs to the region, and community development projects that add to the quality of life in southwest Washington.

This report explains some of the background of the Transportation Priorities Project, assesses the usefulness of its component parts, and gives some ideas on how the project might be replicated.

TPP I

ICC responded to the county's growing crisis in transportation by initiating the Transportation Priorities Project (TPP) in summer 2002. TPP began as a series of events aimed at understanding how the county's transportation system is planned and funded, and at learning about the transportation concerns of residents. The events built on each other and included community meetings, forums, and a community-wide summit.

Citizens throughout the county said they were worried about mobility issues, and they wanted to find solutions and funding for major transportation projects. Government officials wanted to know what citizens needed, what they were willing to pay for, and how they wanted to pay for it. Both groups pointed out the challenges involved in engaging people and providing them with good information about transportation choices, decision-making, and funding options. The groups agreed that better communication, understanding, and information are all keys to addressing the region's transportation challenges more collaboratively and effectively. The following recommendations evolved from the TPP:

1. Coordinate Clark County planning efforts to maximize the chances of receiving state and federal funds.
2. Look at the big picture when planning for Clark County's transportation needs—plan a complete system instead of a piece here, and a piece there.
3. Involve more people. Help citizens and local officials understand each other and work together as a team—create a win-win situation.
4. Convince elected officials to put in place a statewide transportation-funding program that provides dollars for local and state projects.

Everyone seemed to want the same thing: a multi-modal transportation package that served urban, suburban, and rural areas, and could be funded using local, state and federal dollars. Yet nothing similar had been proposed in the past. The next logical step was to develop such a package, which evolved into TPP II and was based on the slogan "knowledge that leads to action."

TPP II

In many respects, TPP II was unprecedented. It was the first time that Clark County jurisdictions had worked together so intensively to develop shared solutions to shared transportation problems. It also marked the first time residents had been so extensively educated about the details of transportation planning and funding. By design, it was conceived and executed mostly by volunteers. Most fundamentally, TPP II saw transportation staff and community members working together to find long-term solutions and funding mechanisms for transportation needs.

TPP II created nothing new. Instead, transportation staff from local jurisdictions and agencies, volunteers from Identity Clark County and the community, and staff from The JD White Company, Inc., coordinated their efforts and gathered up the transportation plans that had already been developed by the county's various jurisdictions.

Funding Levels

They incorporated these existing plans into three scenarios for regional transportation improvements and called them funding levels 1, 2, and 3. Each funding level had a set of projects based on certain funding assumptions. The funding assumptions ranged from *no change* to *significant revenue increase*. Each level was a complete package, a big-picture look at choices for transportation in the region for the next 20 years. Each level included the cost of maintenance, safety, and preservation of the existing infrastructure.

- Funding level 1 entailed no change in current transportation planning and funding. Given the County's population projections for the next 20 years, sticking with the status quo like this would not keep up with expected growth.
- Funding level 2 encompassed mid-range improvements that would require a moderate revenue increase. Level 2 included all the projects listed in both levels 1 and 2. New funding options therefore would be needed; funding could come from a gas tax, license fee, or a street utility tax.
- Funding level 3 entailed significant transportation improvements and a significant revenue increase. This level would meet the needs of the growth projected over the next 20 years. In addition to the projects listed under level 3, this level included all level 1 and 2 projects. Similar to Level 2, new funding options would also need to be identified.

Because it is part of the greater Portland metropolitan area, not all of the county's transportation problems can be solved internally and coordination with the larger region is essential. Running from Canada to Mexico, I-5 is the only continuous interstate on the West Coast and is critical to the local, regional, and national economies. Where it crosses the Columbia River, I-5 connects two major ports, deep-water shipping, up-river barging, two transcontinental rail lines, and much of the industrial land of the region. For the 1+ million residents of metropolitan Portland, I-5 is essential for automobile and transit traffic. I-5 connects people in southwest Washington and northern Oregon with jobs, recreation, shopping, and entertainment. Of the 125,000 trips across the I-5 bridge every day, nearly half are made by Clark County residents who commute to work in Portland.

Many significant efforts have been made to address I-5 transportation issues. Oregon and Washington agree that:

- Doing nothing in the I-5 corridor is unacceptable
- The solution in the I-5 corridor must be multi-modal
- Transportation funds are limited and paying for improvements will require new funds

- The region must consider measures that promote transportation-efficient development

Funding

In addition to asking citizens what transportation improvements they wanted, TPP II asked how they wanted to pay for them. Participants were given a list of funding sources and eligible recipients, restrictions and limitations on funding and funding increases, who decides how funding is spent, and the original source of funding. Multiple funding sources for potential improvements were listed:

- Motor fuel tax
- Property tax
- Sales tax (city)
- Sales tax for transit
- Bonds
- General fund
- Impact fees
- Real estate excise tax
- Creation of a Regional Transportation Improvement District (RTID)
- State grants
- Federal grants
- Regulatory tax
- Employer tax
- Street utility tax
- Vehicle equipment tax
- Tolls
- Port cargo tax
- Lodging tax

Committees

The role of the *Design Committee* was exactly as stated—a committee to design and oversee the process. Members met each month to review the project’s progress and make decisions on next steps. Design Committee members had various interests and backgrounds, but worked together to develop a vision for improving transportation in Clark County. Committee members also served on that subcommittees were formed to assist efficient functioning of the larger group. Rather than having the Design Committee oversee every detail of the project, smaller committees tackled specific tasks so that the Design Committee, working with the project team, could manage the overall project.

The *Packaging and Jurisdiction Committee* was responsible for designing the components of levels 1, 2, and 3 for presentation to the public. This group included members of the Design Committee along with representatives from the Regional Transportation Council; Clark County and the cities of Vancouver, Battle Ground, Ridgefield, Washougal, Camas, and La Center; the Washington State Department of Transportation; and C-TRAN (Clark County’s local transit agency), along with land-use and freight representatives. The packages were made up of existing transportation plans from each jurisdiction. Jurisdiction representatives had never coordinated their efforts to such an extent, and so TPP II helped pave the way for future cooperative efforts between agencies.

The *Public Information Committee* oversaw all public information materials—print and electronic, as well as the web site. Public information materials communicated both project and technical information, and encouraged people to provide their feedback and volunteer.

The *Outreach Committee* oversaw the education process. Members recruited, trained, and supervised the grassroots participants who went out in the community to listen and ask questions.

The *Media Management Committee* watched over media contacts, and the *Marketing and Advertising Committee* headed up the task of selling the program.

Education & Outreach Materials

The materials that the volunteers and project staff used for education and outreach ranged from a course in everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-transportation to some widely distributed business cards.

- Designed for people who wanted detailed information on transportation and TPP II's funding levels, *Transportation 101* was a crash course on transportation. It examined the prioritization of projects, planning, funding, maintaining the system, safety needs, environmental issues, design, right-of-way, and construction. It also included lots of information about funding levels 1, 2, and 3 and the various funding options available.
- A *brochure* introduced TPP II and advertised the Web site. It also highlighted opportunities for people to get involved. It functioned as a precursor to the project questionnaire.
- The *questionnaire* was designed to get input from residents on what funding level of improvements they preferred. It asked questions about which improvements in the funding levels they liked and disliked. It asked for suggested solutions that might work better and how they would prefer to pay for improvements. It also asked what additional information residents might need to help their decision-making.
- *Business cards* distributed in public places, by volunteers, at presentations, and at local businesses got the word out and drew attention to TPP II and the web site.
- In order to reach out to different groups and segments of the population, *media releases and advertisements* were done in various publications of both large and small circulation. These included newspapers, local agency and business and newsletters, and neighborhood communication pieces. The project was also advertised on the local public access television station, CVTV.

TPP II Forum

Held at TPP II's instigation, a public forum introduced the project and solicited grass roots involvement from members of the community. This forum was a key to initiating the community conversation on transportation and funding in Clark County.

Presentations

Nearly 30 presentations were made to various groups throughout the county. This allowed project volunteers to talk directly with people who could help spread the word. City councils, public transit advisory boards, environmental groups, boards of directors, port commissioners, jurisdiction staff, commuters, and community groups were addressed. Over 500 people attended these presentations, and these 500 people told their friends, families, neighbors, and co-workers about TPP II.

TPP II Displays

In order to reach the masses, people have to be caught in the middle of their daily routines. To do this, project displays and materials were located at all sorts of businesses and public places throughout the county. Materials such as display posters, brochures, and business cards advertised the project. Banks, chambers of commerce, public libraries, city halls, the local university and community college, transit centers, and community centers were just some of the places that hosted TPP II materials.

Web Site

An extensive web site (<http://www.tppi.com>) was an integral part of project communications. It contained all the information presented in project materials (e.g., Transportation 101), related links, information on volunteer opportunities, and the questionnaire. People who could not attend a presentation had a chance to voice their opinions through the web site, which was advertised in newspapers and other

publications. Links to the project web site were also located on many related sites. The web site averaged approximately 20 hits per day.

Newsletter

A TPP newsletter was designed by the project team. More than 2,000 copies were printed, and more than 1,500 were distributed through presentations, focus groups, neighborhood and other interest groups. The newsletter contained a survey that the reader could complete and return.

Focus Groups

About halfway through the public outreach and education phase, the Design Committee began holding focus groups. Held throughout the county, these were hosted by elected officials from the county, the cities, and the state. Design Committee members presented information on TPP II to a group of constituents invited by the host. Committee members walked through the questionnaire and gathered feedback from attendees. Focus groups allowed for more in-depth conversation and education about TPP II. Overall, approximately 82 attended seven focus groups.

Essay/Scholarship Contest

Many times, the perspectives of young people are left out when community decisions are made. As future decision-makers, they need to be included. TPP II held an essay contest for local high school juniors and seniors interested in going on to post-secondary education. Those who entered the essay/scholarship contest were asked to examine the funding levels of TPP II and respond to the following:

- Describe your perspective on an ideal transportation system (according to the options available today).
- Discuss why it is important to invest in future transportation projects today.
- How will investing now, or not investing now, affect you later in life?
- Do you think your perspective differs from that of your parents or elders?

Judging by the anemic response, it seemed that not many students were concerned about the future of transportation, or about how to pay for college. Nevertheless, out of the four entries submitted, a winner was selected and received a grant of \$1,000 towards college.

What We Learned

The project survey was valuable for getting candid comments and opinions. Of the respondents, about one-third had been specifically invited to attend a focus group. Most of the remaining two-thirds were members of the general public. Of those who selected a funding level, levels 2 and 3 received the most support, with funding level 3 receiving slightly more. Funding level 1 got just 15% of the votes. Some were undecided and some did not select a funding level.

The following paragraphs highlight some of the common themes as to why respondents did or did not support a specific funding level:

- Some of those who chose level 1 (the status quo) did so because they did not support any new taxes or any improvements that might require new taxes. Interestingly, others who supported level 1 thought none of the funding levels appropriately addressed area transportation needs. Among this group, some commented that the proposed improvements were too focused on single-occupancy vehicles and did not do enough to create a more multi-modal system. This sub-group preferred a transportation system with less emphasis on building roads.

- Those who chose level 2 (mid-level improvements) said they thought this level was most likely to be passed by the voters. Some commented that level 2 began to address Clark County’s needs and plan for long-term solutions. Across the board, people seemed to be interested in long-term (20+ years) solutions.
- Those who chose level 3 (significant improvements) said this level of investment in the system was warranted and the most comprehensive. Many supported it because it included the possibility of introducing light-rail transit and other public transportation options.

In general, supporters of all three funding levels advocated for more education for voters.

Certain taxing mechanisms were clearly preferred over others. The majority of respondents favored user fees over general fees and taxes. In essence, they supported taxes that would not disfavor Clark County vis-à-vis Oregon, as a general sales tax and property tax would.

Respondents most often preferred to pay for transportation improvements by the following mechanisms, ranked in order:

- State gas tax
- City gas tax
- Creating a regional transportation improvement district
- Tolls
- Impact fees

These mechanisms received the least support:

- Regulatory tax
- Employer tax
- Port cargo tax
- General sales tax

Overall, those who became most involved with TPP II were strong supporters of significant or substantial investment in the county’s transportation system. However, many people did not become engaged and did not seem unduly interested in or greatly concerned about transportation, growing congestion, and decreasing revenues. Whether this reflects a predisposition on transportation questions or not, is unknown.

In November 2004, C-TRAN, the local transit agency, asked voters to increase the sales tax the agency is authorized to levy by three-tenths of one cent on a dollar. Of the 80% of eligible voters who voted, 54% rejected the increase. In February 1995, 39% of eligible voters voted 67% to 33% to reject extending light rail to Clark County. These defeats, nearly 10 years apart, reflect attitudes similar to some of those demonstrated in TPP II.

The old saw that says people vote their pocketbooks may be true, unless voters are facing an immediate and overriding anxiety—intolerable congestion, or price increases that are directly traceable to inadequate transportation. Those who see the need to improve Clark County’s transportation network ask how the public can be convinced of the need to act preemptively.

For additional information on TPPII and its constituent parts contact Ginger Metcalf, Executive Director, Identity Clark County at (360) 695-4116.