



REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

Metropolitan Planning • Public Transportation & Operations • Engineering & Construction

Metropolitan Planning Organization of Washoe County, Nevada

November 20, 2020

AGENDA ITEM 6.2

TO: Regional Transportation Commission

FROM: Bill Thomas, AICBT
Executive Director

SUBJECT: Federal Report

Monthly update/messages from RTC Executive Director Bill Thomas – *no action will be taken on this item.*

Federal Update for RTC of Washoe County
Prepared by Cardinal Infrastructure and Thompson Coburn
November 20, 2020 Board Meeting
Prepared November 9, 2020

Presidential Election and Transition

Former Vice President Joe Biden is now President-elect Joe Biden, joined by Vice President-elect Kamala Harris. The Biden campaign has formally launched its transition website, which includes several priorities - COVID-19, economic recovery, racial equity, and climate change.

Two economic recovery priorities include Buy America(n) and the building of modern and resilient infrastructure. The policy statement provides: 1) "Mobilize American manufacturing and innovation to ensure that the future is made in America, and in all of America," and 2) "Mobilize American ingenuity to build a modern infrastructure and an equitable, clean energy future."

Two climate change priorities include further investments in infrastructure and transit. It provides:

Infrastructure: Create millions of good, union jobs rebuilding America's crumbling infrastructure – from roads and bridges to green spaces and water systems to electricity grids and universal broadband – to lay a new foundation for sustainable growth, compete in the global economy, withstand the impacts of climate change, and improve public health, including access to clean air and clean water.

Transit: Provide every American city with 100,000 or more residents with high-quality, zero-emissions public transportation options through flexible federal investments with strong labor protections that create good, union jobs and meet the needs of these cities – ranging from light rail networks to improving existing transit and bus lines to installing infrastructure for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Furthermore, in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, the Biden Administration will institute a mask mandate and "establish a renewable fund for state and local governments to help prevent budget shortfalls..."

In addition to the launch of its transition website, efforts have been well underway to vet potential Cabinet and key Administration positions. Top picks for Secretary of Transportation and various senior level Department and modal Administrator appointments include Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, Congressman Earl Blumenaur (D-OR), former Mayor Rahm Emanuel, LA Metro CEO Phil Washington, Colorado DOT Executive Director Shoshana Lew, Delaware Governor Jack Markell, WSP's John Porcari, and Transportation for America's Beth Osborne.

Congressional Elections

Democrats are currently expected to maintain a narrow majority in the House, while control of the Senate is expected to be decided by the runoff race in Georgia come January. House Republicans will hold their leadership elections on November 17th and House Democratic leadership elections will be held on November 18-19th. All top leaders in both caucuses are seeking re-election.

Taking a closer look at what it means for the legislative agenda in the lame-duck session (November to January 3rd) and the 117th Congress, overall, some of the gridlock we've seen will continue with a Republican Senate majority and Democratic House majority. Speaker Pelosi will not have the leverage she anticipated in the lame-duck session to pass a revised Heroes Act-like relief package, and a smooth passage of infrastructure or climate change legislation in the beginning months of the 117th Congress is unlikely at this point (though this could change).

Ballot Measures

Based on our latest review, 13 out of 17 "major" transit measures on state and local ballots passed, with a total of \$38 billion dollars in additional funding as a result of sales and property tax increases and bond issuances. A total of 53 public transit measures were on the ballot, with the latest reports of 45 measures passing (91.84% success rate).

Josh Cohen, Executive Director of APTA's Center for Transportation Excellence said, "The big measures this year were innovative and collaborative, and represent an approach to development that extends beyond mobility alone. The measures, and the campaigns themselves, talked to voters about equity, cleaner air and water, economic growth, and support for frontline and essential workers – a message and approach that was met with applause."

Notable ballot measures passed include, but are not limited to:

Austin, TX

Adds an 8.75-cent tax rate on property to advance "Project Connect". The \$7.1 billion plan would pay for the construction of light rail lines, new bus routes, and a downtown subway system.

San Antonio, TX

Redirects a one-eighth-cent sales tax to public transit that was previously earmarked for a workforce development program. The tax is estimated to raise \$38.5 million annually. Tax revenue will be directed to transit starting in 2026. Revenue will be split between the VIA Metropolitan Transit and the city and county.

Seattle, WA

Renews a transit sales tax measure to fund transit projects for six years, increasing the tax from 0.1% to 0.15%. Among other items, these revenues will be dedicated to transit network maintenance and related capital improvements, along with fare subsidies for seniors and students.

Missoula, MT

Approves a mill levy increase of 20 mills, which raises approximately \$3 million annually for the Missoula Urban Transportation District and Mountain Line services. The levy increase will fund an increase in bus frequency, add full weekend service, increase service for seniors and those with disabilities. It will also assist in Mountain Line's purchase of electric vehicles.

Appropriations

Senate Majority Leader McConnell (R-KY) and House Speaker Pelosi (D-CA) have both reiterated that they want to pass a FY 2021 omnibus appropriations package in early December, rather than passing a second CR. The Senate Appropriations Committee plans to release all 12 of its FY 2021 appropriation bills on November 10th.

For context, on July 31st, the House passed their version of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 transportation appropriations bill. The transportation appropriations measure totals \$107.2 billion in total budgetary resources for U.S. DOT, an increase of \$21.1 billion above FY 2020 and \$19.4 billion above the President's budget request.

On September 30th, by a vote of 84-10, the Senate passed an appropriations continuing resolution (CR), funding the government at FY 2020 levels through December 11, 2020. The CR also included a one-year extension of the surface transportation bill, the FAST Act.

COVID-19 Relief Package

On October 1st, with a vote of 214-207, the House passed its revised Heroes Act totaling \$2.2 trillion in COVID-19 supplemental relief spending. The bill contains the industry request for \$32 billion to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for public transit funding. The bill also includes \$238 billion to states based on their share of unemployed workers and \$179 billion to local governments, evenly divided between municipalities and counties.

Senate Majority Leader McConnell said the Senate needs to pass an economic stimulus package by the end of the calendar year, and Speaker Pelosi separately indicated she wants to restart negotiations. Republicans aim to pass a smaller package (i.e., previous \$650 billion "targeted" package), while Speaker Pelosi is focusing on a larger \$2.2 trillion relief package (i.e., revised Heroes Act). Leader McConnell maintains that the revised Heroes Act is too expensive and includes too many measures not directly related to the virus.

Furthermore, House Majority Leader Hoyer (D-MD) wrote in a 'Dear Colleague' letter on November 9th, "...I hope the Senate and the Trump Administration will work with the House to reach agreement on a bill along the lines of what we passed in May and October through the Heroes Act. So far, the Republican-led Senate has ignored this pressing challenge, and it is long past time to act. I hope the Senate will change course and do its job." This indicates an unwillingness to compromise down significantly from the \$2.2 trillion proposal, and could lead to challenging negotiations with the possibility of putting off relief until the 117th Congress.

Additionally, following the results of the presidential election, it remains unclear how the Trump Administration may shift its interests and negotiations for the next relief package. A senior White House advisor said, "Trump does not want the last thing he does in office to be a \$2 trillion debt spending bill. We want Biden to own that, not Trump."

CDC Mask Guidance

The U.S. Department of Transportation, in conjunction with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) held a virtual discussion on the CDC's new mask guidance. On October 19th, the CDC released interim guidance that says it now "strongly recommends" masks on public transportation. The discussion was led by Joel Szabat, Acting Under Secretary Transportation for Policy and Dr. Marty Cetron, Director, Division of Global Migration and Quarantine at the CDC.

Dr. Cetron addressed the guidance document, saying that the purpose and timing of it is to clarify the sense of urgency from the CDC, especially as we enter a global resurgence of the virus. He made remarks on the effectiveness of masks in public transportation, saying "everyone wearing a mask is helping to contain their potential virus...[they] curtail transmission to others [and]...provide protection for ourselves."

As to why the CDC has made it a "strong recommendation" rather than a "requirement," Dr. Cetron said, "If we can provide the reason and rationale, then we can go a long way with a voluntarily strong recommended posture....Explain with all clarity what the purposes are and appeal to civic responsibility and the nature of self-protection that comes along with masking." If the CDC can accomplish mask wearing in this manner a "requirement may not be necessary."

Acting Under Secretary Szabat said the Department will support transit agencies on appeals to them from individuals being denied access to transportation for not wearing a mask.

Census

The U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM) held a webinar on October 21st entitled, "How Ending the 2020 Census Count Impacts Local Communities." Participants included Atlanta, GA Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms; San Antonio, TX Mayor Ron Nirenberg; Mesa, AZ Mayor John Giles; Rochester Hills, MI Mayor Bryan Barnett; Marc Morial, President and CEO, National Urban League; and Terri Ann Lowenthal, Census Consultant.

USCM discussed its support for the bipartisan 2020 Census Extension Act (S. 4571 and H.R. 8250), which would extend the statutory deadlines to give Census professionals the time to process the data collected. Section 201 of the House-passed revised Heroes Act contains the bill's language.

Mayor Nirenburg agrees that the abbreviated census count is likely to lead to an undercount, and that minorities and underserved residents are most likely to be skipped. As for whether the census will be reopened, Lowenthal said, "The better course of action is to get the new Congress to evaluate the quality of the count and get experts to look at combining local population estimates with the census data. An expert panel must be convened to revive trust from the public. There could be ways to scientifically correct or adjust census data."