

Blair County Guide to Transportation Project Planning

Created by the Blair County Planning Commission (BCPC), June 2013

Introduction

This describes how transportation problems are identified, how projects get started, and how those projects are funded through the Twelve Year Program/Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The process includes all the municipalities of Blair County, which have representation on the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for Blair County (Altoona Metropolitan Statistical Area) (Altoona MSA). The MPO forms a regional transportation partnership for helping to select transportation planning and programming priorities.

First, what is the TIP and how does it work?

The TIP is a list of priority transportation projects to be funded over the next four year period. It is a living document that is updated every two years through a public involvement process, and it is the first four years of the Twelve Year Program. A project cannot receive federal or state funding unless it is on the TIP.



Projects on the TIP usually proceed in phases (preliminary engineering, final design, relocation of utilities, right-of-way acquisition, and construction). Each project phase is listed on the TIP with funding for that phase and an anticipated schedule. When funds are made available for the final construction phase, a project will no longer appear on future TIP documents even though the project may not yet be completed. Projects must be completed or removed from the TIP in order to add new ones. The TIP must stay within projected revenues and includes only those projects with an identifiable source of funding.

A project on the TIP means that one or more project phases (e.g. preliminary engineering, final design, relocation of utilities, and acquisition of right-of way) are funded in one or more fiscal years. Getting a project to the construction phase could take a few years.

Second, what is the Blair County MPO? What is the MPO's relationship to the BCPC?

The BCPC entered into an agreement with PennDOT to act as the designated transportation planning partner for Blair County, which means helping to provide staff for the MPO. By federal statute, the MPO is the policy body for transportation planning and programming in Blair County (Altoona MSA). In this role, the MPO performs studies for transportation improvements, considers input from its member municipalities, the public and state and federal legislators, and pools the resources and expertise of its partner organizations to plan for and provide improvements to the region's transportation system.

The MPO completes its work through two committees: the Technical Committee of the MPO and the Coordinating Committee / MPO. The Technical Committee is the work committee that the BCPC planning director serves on, along with staff from PennDOT, AMTRAN, Blair County Airport Authority and representatives for the City of Altoona, the boroughs, the townships and the County of Blair. The MPO, or the policy committee that approves the Twelve Year Program/TIP, includes two of the Blair County Commissioners, members from PennDOT, AMTRAN, the Blair County Airport

Authority, the Mayor and a member from the City of Altoona council, one member representing the boroughs and two members representing the townships of Blair County.

Third, what is the process to create the TIP?

The BCPC begins the process by soliciting transportation problems and project suggestions from municipalities and interest groups through the mailing of a survey form. The BCPC also maintains and distributes for review a list of projects on the current TIP and on the long range transportation plan. This survey packet is sent at the beginning of each TIP Update which occurs every odd numbered year. The 2013-2016 TIP update will take effect on October 1, 2012 and the 2015-2018 TIP update will begin in early 2013.

In April of 2013, the BCPC mailed survey packets to the municipalities asking for help in identifying transportation project ideas. **Submitting a survey form describing a transportation problem or a project idea is only the first step, and is NOT a guarantee, that a project will make it onto the TIP.**

How are project funding decisions made?

Transportation problems and project ideas received from surveying municipalities and interest groups are first reviewed and evaluated by the BCPC. The staffs of the BCPC and PennDOT also meet to review candidate projects, discuss any issues, and obtain feedback on which transportation problems/candidate projects might be successful for the TIP. PennDOT state bridge and highway priorities for the TIP are also shared with the BCPC including interstate projects.

The BCPC then provides a recommended ranking of candidate TIP improvements to the MPO.

Projects forwarded by the County are not guaranteed that they will be placed on the TIP. All projects are entered in to negotiation with PennDOT. The Technical Committee recommends a listing or regional projects in Blair County to place on the TIP. The final decision which projects get on the TIP rests with the MPO.



The following guiding principals are used by the MPO and Blair County in evaluating and recommending projects for the TIP:

Carry-Over-Projects – Many on-going projects first appear on the TIP only for their initial phases (e.g. preliminary engineering or final design). A large part of the next TIP budget can be consumed just to finish incomplete projects started earlier. Project phases not funded on the current TIP, which must be funded on the next TIP, will receive the highest priority consideration.

State Bridge Improvements – All improvement surveys received are submitted to PennDOT. PennDOT oversees all state owned bridges and recommends to the Technical Committee and the MPO structures based on either statewide risk assessment scores or preservation activities to extend remaining design life. Risk assessment scores are based on

the condition of the physical components of each bridge and are intended to address those with the highest need for improvements.

Local Bridge Improvements – All local bridges submitted for consideration must compete for funding. The bridge candidates are ranked based on Local Bridge Risk Assessment scores that include Local Input factors from each County. Before action can be taken by the MPO to place a bridge on the TIP, the local government must submit a written commitment to provide the required local match.



Highway Improvements – Intersection improvements and related safety projects are considered by the MPO based on PennDOT crash history data, regional significance, pavement condition and project ideas from local governments and other interest groups. Some Betterment (Maintenance) projects are recommended for the TIP due to their large project scope and costs, needed system preservation, and regional significance. Capacity added projects (e.g., through lanes, center turn lanes) are considered based on regional significance of the corridor and economic development considerations.

What about trail and bicycle/pedestrian projects?

The best source of funding is the Transportation Alternatives (TA) Program, formerly the Transportation Enhancement Program (TEP). The MPO utilizes a separate project review and selection process for eligible TA projects. The MPO determines final project ranking and funding allocation. All approved TA projects are programmed on the current TIP.

Are all projects eligible for the TIP?

No, the following are generally not eligible for TIP funding:

- Small, lower cost projects needed to maintain the existing state owned system such as signing, surface treatments shoulder grading & cutting, and similar activities. These improvements are typically funded through separate State maintenance funds.
- Most locally-owned roads and many bridges are maintained with either municipal tax revenues or Liquid Fuels funds (state gas tax money passed directly to local governments). However, municipal owned bridges with a length of 20 feet or over can receive 80% federal funds and 15% state funds for rehabilitation or replacement and municipal bridges between 8 and 20 feet in length may be eligible to receive 80% state funding for the same.

What opportunities are available for public input?

Public comments are welcome and encouraged during the entire TIP development process. The following are the opportunities for public input:

- Municipalities, transportation interest groups, and the public can submit a survey form to the BCPC at the beginning of each TIP cycle describing transportation problems or project ideas;

- The BCPC discusses and takes action to forward transportation problems & project ideas to the MPO at meetings which are open to the public;
- All MPO Committee meetings where transportation problems are discussed are open to the public and every effort is made to accommodate individuals with special needs;
- The State Transportation Commission (STC) provides the opportunity for public comment on transportation problems and projects at the beginning of each 12 year program/TIP update cycle. In 2013, the STC will pilot a Modernized Participation Method. Details will be provided to the municipalities by the BCPC as soon as they are made available;
- A draft TIP will be available for a 30 day public comment and review period and a public meeting on the draft TIP will be held.

What is the transportation outlook?

Funding is not available to complete every highway, state bridge, and local bridge project. In addition, since 2009 the revenue for the TIP has dropped region wide about 40%, and since 2002 some material costs have increased more than threefold. These facts make the regions ever-growing need to resurface highways and rebuild bridges a growing problem.

Transportation priorities have been, and will likely continue to be rehabilitating or replacing deficient bridges, maintaining the existing roadway network and highway safety projects.



Projects listed on the TIP are subject to changing federal, state, and local priorities and funding levels. There are always more projects than funding available to complete them. The BCPC and the MPO both strive to insure that the highest project priorities of the region are being addressed within the limits of available funding resources.

Where can I get more information?

Blair County Planning Commission, Phone: (814) 940-5978, or at <http://www.blairco.org/planning>

PennDOT District 9-0, 1620 North Juniata Street, Hollidaysburg, PA 16648; Phone (814) 696-7250, or at <http://www.dot.state.pa.us>

Please note that the layout and much of the content of this brochure was borrowed from the "Bedford County Guide to Transportation Project Planning" of September 2012 and adapted for Blair County use.