Report from the Berkshire Transportation Advisory Committee to the Berkshire Metropolitan Planning Organization

~ From the Meeting Held on January 20, 2009 ~

The following TAC representatives were present:
Frank Feigin, Town of Windsor Representative
Sam Haupt, Town of Peru Representative, TAC Chairman
Bob Malnati, Berkshire Regional Transit Authority Representative
Joe Scelsi, Berkshire Mall Representative
Mark Siegars, Town of Tyringham Representative, TAC Vice Chairman
Ron Tinkham, Baker Hill Road District Representative
Jeff Vincent, Town of Lenox Representative

Also present were:
Peter Frieri, Mass Highway District 1
Sarah Hudson, Town of Tyringham
Denise Johns, BCC
Nat Karns, BRPC Executive Director
Christine Neumann, BRPC Transportation Planner

Summary of Items Discussed

1. Report from the October 14th TAC Meeting

There were no comments.

2. Report from the October 21st MPO Meeting

There were no comments.

3. Elections for Chair and Vice Chair for FFY2009 (October-September)

Mr. Karns explained that the role of the Vice Chair is to administer meetings in the Chairperson's absence. The Chairperson is responsible for administering fair meetings with opportunities for involvement from TAC members and the public and to attend meetings of the Berkshire MPO in order to report on the majority/minority reports and recommendations of the TAC. The Chair also coordinates with BRPC regarding meeting materials and structure.

Mr. Tinkham moved to nominate Mark Siegars for Chair and Sam Haupt for Vice Chair. Mr. Haupt suggested that there should be some rotation to the positions but that there needs to be greater participation from other TAC members. Mr. Siegars mentioned he has an interest in regional transportation issues.

Hearing no other nominations, Mr. Tinkham moved to close the nominations. Mr. Scelsi seconded. The motion to close the nominations carried unanimously with Mr. Feigin abstaining.

The motion to appoint Mr. Siegars for Chair and Mr. Haupt for Vice Chair passed unanimously.

4. Lee Area Traffic Study Update

Ms. Neumann presented on the Lee Area Traffic Study. In 2003, Town officials from Lee, Lenox and Stockbridge requested BRPC to develop a study that would explore ways of alleviating traffic in downtown Lee. The traffic congestion and resulting impaired regional mobility in this area have been identified as issues needing study in both the Berkshire MPO's Regional Transportation Plan (2003/2007) and Mass Highway's North Central Berkshire Access Study (2001). In 2005, the ADT on Main Street was 15,667. It is important to note that approximately 16,000 vehicles per day is a high volume of traffic for a two lane downtown street.

A Working Group comprised of Town officials and appointees from Lee, Lenox, Stockbridge and Becket along with other regional organizations have met eleven times since April 2007. BRPC has held two public meetings. The focus of the first public meeting on November 1, 2007 was to gather input on problems and potential solutions. The focus of the second public meeting, held on August 27, 2008 was to present the analysis of existing conditions and receive public input on various alternatives. The focus of the third public meeting, to be held on January 21st, 2009 will be to present BRPC staff recommendations.

There were several main goals of the study. The first was to explore ways to improve regional mobility and access to I-90. Secondly, the study explored ways to improve mobility and safety for motorists and pedestrians alike within Lee. Also, truck traffic on Main Street in Lee is an issue of particular concern to Town residents. This issue became apparent at the first public meeting as an important issue this study would need to consider.

Over the last two years, BRPC inventoried existing conditions, including demographic, environmental and transportation related data. BRPC then began the process of identifying and evaluating potential alternatives. The study area included the Towns of Lenox, Lee, Becket, Stockbridge and West Stockbridge, although the impacts of various alternatives were examined as far north as Dalton and Pittsfield.

At the beginning of the study, there were a total of 27 alternatives which had been identified in previous studies. Handouts were provided describing these alternatives. The 27 alternatives ranged in location and scope from short-term improvements in downtown Lee such as the addition of traffic signals at key intersections, to full interchanges in West Stockbridge and Becket. These 27 alternatives were broken down into categories based on geographic location.

The evaluation process began with a coarse screening which assessed direct and indirect environmental, residential and transportation impacts. The coarse screening also included an assessment of the effect on travel time in terms of miles and hours traveled as well as the improvement of north-east congestion through Lee.

At the May 6th Working Group meeting, the Working Group determined to carry 13 of the original 27 alternatives forward into a fine screening evaluation. The West Stockbridge interchange was dropped at this point. Two or three alternatives in each geographic area were retained. The working group had specific input throughout the screening process and concurred with the elimination of various alternatives at each step of the process.

A fine screening analysis was performed for the remaining 13 alternatives. The fine screening included more detailed environmental, land use and transportation related analysis. Based on this analysis, at the August 4th Working Group meeting, the Working Group decided that five of the remaining 13 alternatives would be carried forward into the detailed assessment. None of the alternatives in the near and far east were carried further – including alternatives to construct a full interchange in Becket. The benefits of these alternatives were unapparent and the impacts were high.

The five remaining alternatives were: Alternative 1: Transportation Systems Management (TSM) improvements (traffic signals, re-striping, reconfigure parking), Alternative 2A: One way pair with Main St. and Canal St., Alternative 3A: New bypass located on the west side of the River from Route 102 northward to Park Street to Laurel Street at the Summer Street intersection including TSM improvements to Route 20 northward to the Route 7/Route 20 intersection, Alternative 5: Route 7 exit and Alternative 10: West Rd. exit

At the October 27th Working Group meeting, it was determined that alternative 2A would be dropped but that Alternative 8B – the Becket interchange would be reevaluated at the request of the Working Group and the Lee Select Board.

The travel time analysis for Alternative 8B looked at the existing route using 7/20 from Pittsfield and two potential alternate routes – 1.) Using Route 8 from Dalton and 2.) Using Washington Mountain Rd./McNerney Road to Route 8 in Becket. The existing route takes the least amount of time, even with improvements to Route 8, Washington Mt. Rd and Bonnie Rigg Hill Road due to the higher speed limit on I-90.

After reviewing this information, the Working Group agreed unanimously that the Becket interchange alternatives could be dropped from further consideration.

One step in the final analysis was looking at how the Level of Service (LOS) of key intersections would be affected if any of the four remaining alternatives were implemented. LOS is used to measure the amount of delay at intersections. For signalized intersections, the delays experienced from all approaches are considered. For non-signalized intersections, the main roads are relatively free of impediments. Therefore, analysis of these intersections measures the worst delay turning onto the main street from a side street. A left turn from a side street typically experiences the longest delay. An A rating refers to a delay of less than 10 seconds. An F rating refers to a delay of more than 80 seconds. It is important to note that it is possible for LOS to deteriorate beyond an F rating but that the computer software (Syncro 6.0) is unable to compute a delay beyond 1,000 seconds.

Three of the non-signalized intersections in downtown Lee are already at failing LOS. These are the Main/Center, Main/Park and the Park/Housatonic intersections. In 2030, if no improvements are made, the LOS of key intersections, particularly at non-signalized intersections, will continue to decline and a fourth non-signalized intersection (Park/High) will begin to experience delay. For the three already failing intersections, the delay will increase beyond 1,000 seconds.

Another step in the final analysis was looking at how the LOS of key intersections would be affected if traffic signals were installed at three intersections in downtown Lee. The addition of traffic signals in the downtown would increase travel time through Lee, but are needed in order to help the side street traffic turn onto Main Street.

The model calculated LOS for 2030 with traffic signals at the Main St./Center St., Main St./Park St., and Park St./Housatonic St. intersections. The three non-signalized intersections in downtown Lee which are already failing will continue to fail without signals. However, even with the addition of traffic signals along Route 20, the intersections will fail in 2030 without the implementation of one of the non-TSM alternatives. BRPC also analyzed what the affect on LOS would be if the traffic signals were implemented in conjunction with the other alternatives. All of the alternatives will serve to improve LOS if they are implemented in conjunction with traffic signals. However, it is important to note that the travel times for Alternatives 3A, 5 and 10 were not affected by the addition of traffic signals in downtown Lee because these alternatives bypass the downtown.
Another part of the final analysis was looking at the north-east travel time for the four remaining alternatives. Travel time analyses were performed for the 2030 projection both with and without the addition of traffic signals along Route 20. None of the remaining alternatives show a major difference in travel times. However, trucks would be likely to use a more direct route rather than go through the downtown area, even if this meant traveling a few miles further. The one major difference between the remaining alternatives is that Alternative 3A would not draw as much traffic as Alternatives 5 and 10 because Alternative 5 and 10 are new exits whereas Alternative 3A would be located along local routes.

Speed and Delay surveys were performed on Route 20 from the Prime Outlets to the Lee/Lenox town lines for the AM, PM and Mid-day peak periods. Speed and delay surveys are based on comparing actual travel time experience with the travel time generated from the model based on traveling at posted speed limits. BRPC performed the surveys on August 21, 2006 from 12-2 pm and from 4-6 pm to capture the traffic generated from the James Taylor concert at Tanglewood. Another survey was performed during a typical weekday from 7-9 am, 12-2 pm and 4-6 pm. The average observed travel time was higher than the average posted speed travel time – meaning it takes more time to travel through Lee than one would think. In each direction, the average travel time was almost 1 minute greater per car than the posted speed permits.

At the December 9th Working Group meeting, once the Working Group had a chance to review the re-assessment of the Route 8 alternative and its inability to reduce travel time, it was determined that the following three alternatives would move into the final recommendation:

- Alternative 1 – Implementation of Transportation Systems Management (TSM) practices such as installing traffic signals at the Park St./Main St. and Center St./Main St. intersections
- Alternative 3A – new bypass located on the west side of the River from Route 102 northward to Park Street to Laurel Street at the Summer Street intersection including TSM improvements to Route 20 northward to the Route 7/Route 20 intersection. This alternative will act as a fall back measure if the Turnpike Authority is not amenable to a new interchange

- Alternatives 5/10 were combined – this alternative would involve a new exit in the vicinity of the Lee/Stockbridge town line, in the area between the travel plaza off West Road in Lee and Route 7 in Stockbridge. The exact location would be determined in the EIR phase of study.

BRPC staff is preparing its final recommendations to present at tomorrow's public meeting. BRPC staff plans to recommend that each of the remaining three alternatives move forward into an Environmental Impact Report. The final report and recommendations will be brought to the TAC for input before being brought to the Berkshire MPO, which will make the decision as to whether these recommendations will move forward into this more detailed EIR phase of study.

In response to questions from TAC members, Mr. Karns explained that the Lee Area Traffic Study is part of the BRPC Unified Planning Work Program for the current fiscal year as BRPC staff are currently wrapping up the study. Mr. Karns also explained that, although an ADT of approximately 16,000 in downtown Lee is lower than the ADT for South Street in Pittsfield south of Taylor St. (22,200 in 2006) and East Street east of Fenn St. (16,700 in 2003), it is still a high volume of traffic on a two-lane roadway through a downtown area with on-street parking and a number of pedestrian crossings. Mr. Karns also explained that the elimination of the on-street parking in downtown Lee was not specifically examined, but would be part of the TSM recommendation. No comments were received about the parking in Lee in relation to the needs of the through traffic. Mr. Karns also conceded that, because the traffic counts were performed in 2006, they may not be entirely reflective of today's traffic conditions since the economic situation in Lee has changed as many mills in the area have closed.

Mr. Feigin suggested that it is possible for downtown business to increase even with the diversion of traffic away from the downtown. He also suggested that, if traffic signals were installed, the through traffic could still have preference in order to keep the trucks from having to stop. Mr. Karns explained that the traffic signals would be coordinated, but that stops would still be needed to allow pedestrians to cross Main Street safely.

Mr. Haupt asked if Route 7 would need to be widened if that became the preferred alternative and would there be a need for development restrictions. Mr. Frieri noted that this determination would need to be made at the next phase of study. Mr. Karns added that BRPC would encourage land protection along Route 7 as well as mechanisms to control access. Further, because it is estimated that this alternative would take about 4,000 vehicles off of Main Street, it may not be necessary to widen Route 7 beyond two lanes as long as it had good shoulders. Based on this level of analysis, the BRPC staff recommendation is that a well managed two lane roadway with reasonable improvements would be adequate. Mr. Karns also specified that Exits 1 and 2 would remain open.

5. Member Items for Discussion

There were no member items for discussion.

6. Next Meeting Date and Agenda

The next TAC meeting will be held on Tuesday, February 10th at 5:00. The TAC will discuss Berkshire County transportation projects to be amended and added to the 2007-2010 TIP for inclusion in the proposed federal economic stimulus package.

Report on Issues Brought to a Motion

- The motion to close the nominations for Chair and Vice Chair carried with one abstention.
- The motion to appoint Mr. Siegars for Chair and Mr. Haupt for Vice Chair carried unanimously.