

## **Joint Agency Planning for MetroLink Expansion in St. Louis, Missouri**

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Since 1996, the St. Louis region has been conducting all multimodal transportation corridor planning through an interagency planning unit housed at the East-West Gateway Coordinating Council (MPO). We believe this to be a unique approach to transportation planning in the United States. The joint planning group, known as the Transportation Corridor Improvement Group (TCIG), includes staff members from each of three agencies—the transit authority (Metro), the state transportation department and the MPO. To date, approximately 10 planning studies or major investment studies have been completed by this group, including 4 studies that included consideration of major MetroLink light rail extensions.

This paper will summarize the St. Louis experience in carrying out these joint planning studies, particularly those involving corridors in which light rail expansion is an alternative, and will discuss the benefits and issues that have resulted from using this collaborative process over the past 6 years.

Many significant benefits have resulted from the joint planning of the MetroLink extensions including better public understanding and acceptance of the process, a more coordinated cooperative planning process, more effective community engagement due to consistency of people and messages, and more efficient use of limited planning staff, consultants, and other resources with minimal duplication of effort. However, there are some pitfalls that we are working to resolve in current and future studies. The most notable of these involves the need to ensure the complete buy-in of staff outside the TCIG within the three agencies during the planning process so as to facilitate the smooth transfer of the resulting projects to the implementing agency.

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### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the benefits of collaborative joint agency planning for light rail transit extensions by examining the experience in St. Louis, Missouri, over the past 6 years.

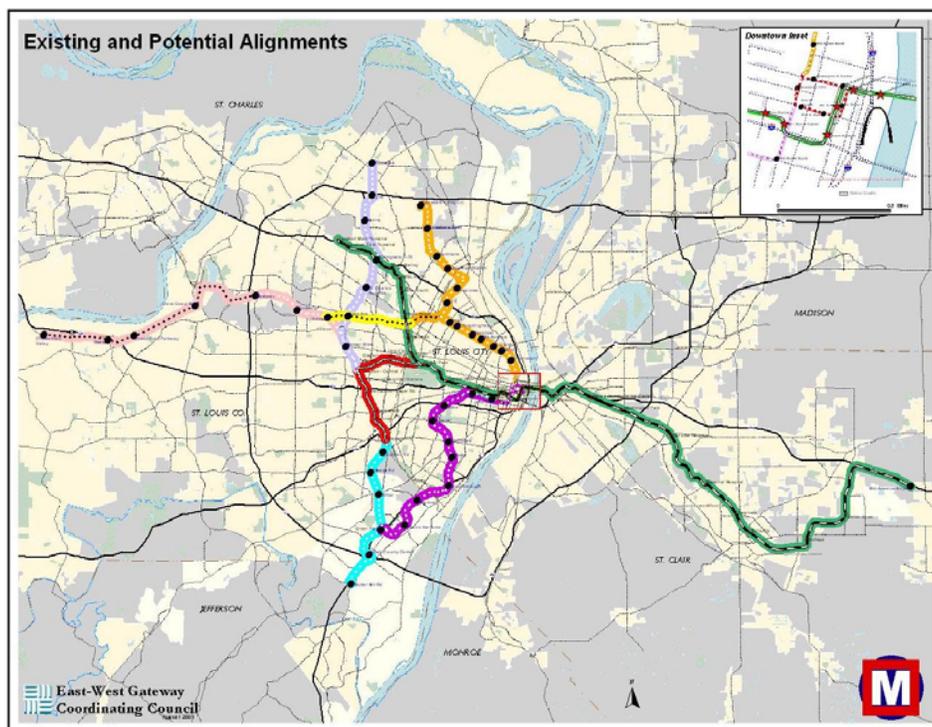
## BACKGROUND

### St. Louis Region

The St. Louis region includes four counties and the city of St. Louis in Missouri, plus three counties across the Mississippi River in Illinois. The regional population is approximately 2.5 million of which approximately 1 million reside in St. Louis County.

### MetroLink System

The initial 18-mi line in the St. Louis region's MetroLink light rail system opened for service in 1993. This line linked Illinois with downtown St. Louis, major destinations in the city of St. Louis and St. Louis County and Lambert–St. Louis International Airport. In May 2001, an 18-mi extension opened in St. Clair County, Illinois, to which 3 mi more of track were added in 2003. To a varying extent, these existing lines were all federally funded. A locally-funded 9-mi extension in the city of St. Louis and St. Louis County is currently under construction and scheduled to open for service in 2006. Five other potential extensions in Missouri have been identified as a result of major investment studies (MISs) completed since 1997, one of which is now being carried forward in an alternatives analysis and draft environmental impact studies (DEIS). At this point, no funding has been identified for any of these five proposed routes. See [Figure 1](#) depicting existing and potential alignments for the MetroLink system.



**FIGURE 1** Existing and potential alignments for the MetroLink system.

## **Pre-1996 Transportation Planning Approach**

Up until the fall of 1996, major planning studies for proposed transportation improvement projects were carried out by either the metropolitan planning organization (MPO), the East–West Gateway Coordinating Council (EWGCC), the transit authority (Metro), Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT), or Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT).

Planning of the light rail system in St. Louis has been an evolutionary process. Early planning efforts were characterized by minimal or no interagency collaboration. All of the planning, environmental documentation, and preliminary engineering for the initial MetroLink line in the 1980s was carried out by the MPO. During that time, there was real uncertainty in the region as to what organization would build and operate the light rail system, since there was a lack of technical capability and interest at the transit authority. The final decision to hand off the project to the transit authority was a political decision made by the MPO board of directors. The transit authority had not been involved in the project up until this point. Only minimal design changes were made before or during construction.

The MPO also carried out the planning work for the first extension into St. Clair County, Illinois, in the early 1990s, this time with very limited involvement of the transit authority whose technical staff were focused on building the initial line. When the St. Clair project was handed over for preliminary design, the transit authority made some significant design changes. This situation created confusion on the part of the public and local governments.

Based on this early experience, the agencies recognized that there was a need for a more collaborative planning process, with the transit authority being more fully engaged in light rail studies.

The federal regulations were also evolving. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) changed the federal transportation planning process significantly. The requirement for integrated project development from transportation corridor planning through project implementation confirmed the need for serious involvement of the implementing agencies throughout the planning process. However, the St. Louis regional MIS experience for planning light rail and highways which followed ISTEA in 1993 to 1996 was still characterized by studies done by one agency somewhat in isolation from the others, a lack of attention to overall financial capacity for the region to carry out the improvements, and some dispute over the validity of calculations of travel demand, project operational characteristics and impacts, and costs.

The regional agencies tried to coordinate their work as much as they could, but recognized the limitations of not having formal, integrated agreements between the MPO, responsible for planning and authorizing the region's long-range transportation plan, and the implementing agencies, responsible for the development, operation and maintenance of major improvement projects.

This experience finally led to a frank confrontation on the issues among the agencies and a proposal to implement a unique solution to regional transportation planning.

## **COLLABORATIVE PLANNING**

### **Planning Approach since 1996**

In 1996, the EWGCC, Metro (at that time known as the Bi-State Development Agency), and MoDOT entered into formal agreements to cooperate in carrying out transportation planning activities within the Missouri portion of the region. As part of these agreements, the three agencies created a planning group—Transportation Corridor Improvement Group (TCIG)—staffed by employees of each agency and physically housed together in the council’s offices. This group has maintained its unique identity as a joint planning group and has been responsible for the day-to-day management of all major corridor planning studies (mass transit and roadway) carried out since that time in the Missouri portion of the region.

IDOT has continued to carry out planning studies on its own, with representation from the MPO and transit authority on study management groups formed to provide guidance and oversight on individual corridor study projects.

The two formal memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between the MPO and the transit authority and the MPO and MoDOT created a joint interagency planning and programming process for developing the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and the updates to the long-range transportation plan. As stated, this cooperative process must be used for the planning of all major transportation programs and projects in Missouri, regardless of mode, in order for the projects to be considered for programming. The MOUs spell out general planning principles to guide the cooperative planning process and set up administrative guidelines for the contribution of personnel and resources to implement the process. The MOUs were signed by the officers of the agencies’ boards of directors in 1996. The MPO and the transit authority also sign cost-sharing agreements to cover specific planning studies for MetroLink extension corridors.

### **Transportation Corridor Improvement Group**

TCIG is a concept central to the success of the collaborative endeavor. The commitment of permanent staff from each of the agencies—the MPO, transit authority, and DOTs—to work together as a joint planning group elevates the work done by the group above any individual agency effort.

The TCIG is made up of six individuals, two from each of the signatory agencies. The manager of the planning group is a TCIG member from the MPO. The members of the group from the DOTs and transit authority may have secondary responsibilities at their agencies (depending on their individual TCIG workload or assignments), but their primary work is the TCIG. No agency work takes precedence over TCIG responsibilities.

The TCIG members from the transit authority are from the planning or operations units. The transit authority also designates an internal liaison to the TCIG to facilitate dissemination and internal discussion of information generated by the TCIG within the authority. Individual transit authority TCIG members often serve as “leader” for planning studies primarily focusing on light rail extension corridors, or in areas where transit impact is significant. The transit TCIG members are well versed in the regional transit network. They facilitate on-board survey work and are knowledgeable about rail and bus operations as well as the TRAPEZE system the transit authority uses for bus routing and bus and rail scheduling. The transit TCIG staff members also attend public meetings held by the transit authority and are able to promote understanding and acceptance on the

part of the general public of the region's long-range transportation plan and planning processes.

TCIG members from MoDOT are from the planning or traffic operations units. They most often serve as "leader" for studies primarily focusing on corridors where major road and bridge improvements are being considered. The MoDOT TCIG members are well versed in the characteristics of the road network, traffic planning, design, management and operations, and traffic data collection and analysis.

The regional travel demand model used in planning studies is housed at the MPO. TCIG members make use of the model for study purposes and are involved in model updating and verification.

The members of the TCIG also assist MPO staff with work on the long-range transportation plan. This approach is designed to ensure that there is consistency and comparability between the studies and the plan.

The three agencies attempt to maintain a balance of skills within the TCIG by appointments made to the group. The level of experience of TCIG members is such that any member could serve as "leader" of a particular corridor study. The individual agencies pay the salaries of their appointees to the group. The group is physically housed at the MPO. TCIG members' computers are linked with each other and with their own agency's networks to facilitate their work.

### **Project Planning/Programming**

The TCIG plans its work program within the framework of studies needed to advance Missouri elements of the region's long-range transportation plan. The very existence of the TCIG means no single agency moves a major planning study forward without the agreement, understanding, and participation of the others (albeit, at varying levels of particular staff involvement depending on the nature of the individual study). This collaboration results in a prioritization of effort that is accomplished across modes, taking into account the total regional need for advancing particular Missouri projects on the metropolitan area's long-range agenda.

## **ANALYSIS OF COLLABORATIVE PLANNING EXPERIENCE**

### **Planning Studies**

The TCIG has carried out and completed a total of 10 major planning studies or MISs since 1996. Although almost all of these were multimodal in nature, four of them specifically considered major MetroLink extensions. These four studies were the Cross-County Corridor Conceptual Design and Environmental Analysis, completed in June of 1999, and the Northside, Southside, and Daniel Boone Major Transportation Investment Analyses, completed in May 2000. Although the EWGCC was the main sponsor for each of these studies, the day-to-day team leaders were from the transit agency (Southside, Northside), the state DOT (Daniel Boone), and the council (Cross-County). Each study resulted in the selection of a specific MetroLink alignment as the locally preferred alternative (LPA) by the EWGCC Board of Directors.

At the conclusion of the conceptual design planning study, responsibility for the Cross-County project was handed over to Metro for engineering, design and construction. This extension is locally funded and currently under construction. The line will open for revenue service in 2006.

The TCIG is currently engaged in carrying out an alternatives analysis and DEIS to move

forward a MetroLink extension for the Metro South study area in South St. Louis County (Figure 1.). This planning study is scheduled for completion in early 2005.

## **Summary of Collaborative Planning Experience**

### *Public Understanding and Acceptance of the Planning Process*

Prior to the existence of the interagency TCIG, individual agencies sponsored MISs or planning studies, some of which were carried out in a near vacuum. This resulted in confusion on the part of the public as to “who is responsible for what” and “how things got planned and implemented.” In such an environment, the role of the MPO as the authorizing agency for the long-range transportation plan, the purpose of the plan, and its relationship to the TIP and the programming process was often obscured. The role of implementing agencies (i.e., the transit authority and the DOTs) and their need to be connected to MPO planning and programming processes, was sometimes misunderstood.

In one example, in 1995, the transit authority undertook studies in two corridors that looked at commuter rail as a major investment alternative. Members of the board of directors of the MPO, the elected officials who would have funded the implementation of commuter rail had it been selected as a locally preferred alternative in the corridors, chose not to vote on moving forward. The confusion on the part of the public as to the authority of the MPO or the transit agency to make a final determination on the implementation of such projects led to a general lack of trust in the study process by the public and finger pointing on the part of the MPO and transit authority.

It was out of this experience that the need for greater cooperation among agencies was recognized and the formalization of the joint planning process was born. Now, with the collaborative process in place, the TCIG responsible for all MISs, and 10 completed studies, the public has a much better understanding of the roles of the MPO, transit authority, and state DOT and respect for the form and predictability of the study process.

### *Corridor Study Effectiveness*

Many significant benefits have resulted from the collaborative, joint planning of the MetroLink extensions in particular. The planning process for the corridor studies is smoother, more coordinated and cooperative and better understood by the public. The community engagement process is more effective due to consistency of people and messages being presented. At all public meetings, conducted during the study process, the public is reminded of the MIS process, the roles of the planning and implementing agencies, the overall funding environment for major investments, and the milestones to be encountered along the road to implementation.

In general, the planning studies now progress smoothly from the planning stage, to selection of a locally preferred alternative, to implementation quicker with the joint agency cooperation of the MPO and implementing agencies.

The collaborative major investment study process itself is also more cost-effective now compared to pre-TCIG work since more efficient use is made of limited planning staff, consultants, and other resources with minimal duplication of effort.

### *Comparability Across Studies and Prioritization in an Environment of Fiscal Constraint*

The collaborative process ensures comparability of the planning study results across studies. Travel demand forecasting, cost estimating, financial analysis, and other critical study elements conducted in similar fashion for different corridor studies allow for an easy comparison of project benefits among studies. This is particularly useful and relevant in an environment of fiscal constraint.

The collaborative approach helps assure a consistent, regional, multimodal perspective for making funding decisions. It assists in development of a financially-constrained regional long-range plan and TIP.

Due to the involvement of all the agencies during the planning process, the multimodal approach, and comparability of study results, the task of prioritizing for further project development and implementation is enhanced.

Trade-offs between road and transit improvements are made easier by the process. For example, in 1997, the Cross-County MIS resulted in a decision to forego the building of a new Interstate extension in favor of implementation of an extension of MetroLink in the south corridor. The public had weighed-in in favor of the transit element in spite of some local elected officials favoring the road extension. The elected officials on the MPO Board of Directors respected the planning process and voted for MetroLink expansion in the corridor as the locally preferred alternative.

### *Planning to Implementation*

The TCIG was developed, in part, to make the transition from corridor planning to project implementation as seamless as possible. However, we have had varying degrees of success in achieving this goal. In most cases, the transition has gone smoothly, while in some others it has proven to be a more difficult task. In order to assure efficient and effective project development, the results of the joint planning studies including the selection of the locally preferred alternative must be accepted by the implementing agencies, even if the planning decisions were made by the MPO Board of Directors. In the case of one MetroLink extension, the transit authority chose to reopen the conceptual design decision that had been made during the planning study and to reengage the community. This action led to considerable confusion on the part of the public, slowed the project implementation and lessened the credibility of the TCIG and the collaborative planning process. This experience highlighted the need to ensure the complete buy-in of all relevant staff within the three agencies during the planning process so as to facilitate the smooth transfer of the resulting projects to the implementing agency.

## **CONCLUSION**

We believe that our collaborative planning approach including the existence of a joint agency team working together everyday at the MPO is unique in this country. It has led to many positive results over the past 6 years. However, there are some possible pitfalls which we have identified. We are committed to this collaborative process and will continue to refine the concept to make it function even better.