



MEMORANDUM

To: MPO Policy Committee

From: Bob Dean, Deputy Executive Director for Local Planning

Date: December 30, 2014

Re: Local Technical Assistance (LTA) Program Evaluation

Last year, CMAP staff conducted a thorough evaluation of the Local Technical Assistance (LTA) program, with the intention of using the past three years of experience with the program in order to focus future resources most effectively. The findings of the evaluation have been shared with working committees and other stakeholders at a series of meetings during summer and early fall 2014. This memo represents the culmination of the program evaluation, and presents the key conclusions which will shape the program moving forward.

Some of the evaluation's conclusions have already influenced the 2014 selection of projects, which was completed in October. Other findings will be used to drive program focus and project selection in future years, and some of these will need further development. For example, CMAP staff recommends beginning to require local match, but this memo does not include a specific proposal for match requirements; those details will continue to be discussed through early 2015, in advance of next year's call for projects.

Discussion of the conclusions in the following pages is requested.

ACTION REQUESTED: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of the Local Technical Assistance (LTA) program is to implement GO TO 2040, the region's long range comprehensive plan, by providing assistance to communities in aligning their local plans and regulations with the regional plan. The program was initiated in spring 2011 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This grant expired in January 2014, but the program has been continued since that time using other funding sources, primarily UWP funds.

As of November 2014, approximately 90 projects have been completed through the LTA program, with 50 more currently underway. CMAP maintains a separate webpage for each completed project, and many ongoing projects, on the [LTA website](#).

The material in this memo is taken largely from three separate documents which were presented to CMAP's committees during summer 2014. These background documents are available [at this link](#).

These documents describe the evaluation methods that were used to evaluate the LTA program. Methods included external surveys, internal project scoring (both quantitative and qualitative), basic statistical analysis, and a review of project accomplishments after completion. These methods are not described in this memo, which focuses on conclusions, but more description can be found in the background documents linked above.

Several key recommendations concerning the LTA program are described further in the following pages. The four main categories of recommendations include:

- The LTA program has been effective at translating the principles of GO TO 2040 to the local level, and should continue to be a major part of CMAP's work program for the foreseeable future.
- Some LTA projects have had implementation successes, leading to meaningful changes in the communities that they cover. Others have not progressed very far since their adoption. CMAP should increase the focus of the LTA program on plan implementation.
- The single most important driver of project quality is the degree of local commitment. CMAP should confirm that there is full local commitment to an LTA project before beginning work, and should also structure the project process to increase commitment. This includes requiring a local match, among other adjustments.
- The broad focus of the LTA program is beneficial, and CMAP should continue to seek external resources to support the non-transportation elements of the program. Some elements of GO TO 2040 deserve further focus in the LTA program: economic development and reinvestment; stormwater, flooding, and disaster resilience; and freight.

Program continuation

Since its initiation, the LTA program has been a major CMAP activity. Counting the new projects announced in October, the program has devoted over \$14 million in consulting contracts and staff resources to assist communities with planning. While still relatively new, the program is well-known across the region. In many ways, the LTA program has been the most

visible implementation of GO TO 2040. The plans produced through the LTA program have been strongly aligned with GO TO 2040, and have focused most thoroughly on multimodal transportation, reinvestment in existing communities, and intergovernmental coordination – all central elements of GO TO 2040. The program has also been highlighted as a best practice by numerous partners, including several federal agencies whose funding supports it.

The program has been quite popular with municipalities and community groups. This is demonstrated in part by the number of applications to the program. Each year, the number of applications continues to exceed available resources by a wide margin; in 2014, only one-quarter of applications were able to be funded. Results of follow-up surveys with local partners have also been very positive, with 90 to 95 percent of respondents expressing full satisfaction with the process and overall result of their LTA project.

Recommendations

Overall, this evaluation shows that the LTA program has been successful, and should continue to be a regular part of CMAP's activities. Some adjustments to the program are recommended, covered in more detail in the sections below.

Implementation

Plans are worth little unless they are implemented. The purpose of the LTA program is not simply to produce good plans, but to achieve positive results in the communities that they cover. Many project sponsors also recognize the importance of implementation, and many ask CMAP for advice and assistance with implementation after projects are complete. However, plan implementation has had mixed results: in some places, significant progress has been made, and in others, implementation efforts have been stymied or never got off the ground.

In the background documents mentioned above, case studies for three plans that were completed in 2012 – in Joliet, Park Forest, and Fairmont – are presented. All have seen implementation success, and share some common characteristics. In each case, there has been a dedicated local sponsor that has put significant effort into moving plan implementation along. Each has included a CMAP role, ranging from participation in implementation task forces to conducting significant follow-up LTA projects. Perhaps most significantly, all have also featured significant actions by external organizations. In Joliet, state-level elected officials have taken on plan implementation as a priority, and the Will County Forest Preserve District has pursued land acquisition consistent with the plan. In Park Forest, a grant from The Chicago Community Trust kicked off implementation by funding a staff person to focus on it. And in Fairmont, infrastructure investment by Lockport Township, Lockport Park District, and Pace has complemented investment by Will County.

These case studies confirm several observations about implementation roles. To start, leadership on implementation needs to be locally driven. Over the past two years, it has become extremely evident that local commitment to project success is the primary driver of implementation. "Local commitment" does not necessarily mean commitment of financial resources or staff time, although these certainly help. Instead, the term is used to mean a combination of responsiveness, energy, leadership, and willingness to use plan recommendations for day-to-day prioritization and decision-making.

CMAP has typically taken a relatively minor, indirect role in implementation. CMAP conducts quarterly check-ins with project sponsors to discuss implementation progress, and offers general advice and review; communities report that they find these regular check-ins helpful. In some cases, CMAP also conducts training or commits to large follow-up projects through the LTA program. But most commonly, the CMAP role has involved aligning community needs with available resources from other external partners. Most of the above examples, while facilitated by CMAP, have involved resources and expertise from other groups. In all of these cases, CMAP's role was limited in terms of time and resources committed, but was critical to link communities with relevant pools of resources and expertise.

The involvement of partner organizations, as noted above, appears to be quite important for implementation. This finding is somewhat unexpected, but makes sense in hindsight. Often, external partners have resources and responsibilities that put them in good positions to be key implementers.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, several changes to the program are recommended. These are primarily adjustments to process and administration that are meant to encourage implementation as a regular part of the LTA program.

1. CMAP should be more direct about assigning implementation responsibility to LTA staff. From this point on, staff in the Local Planning division will have items in their work plans related to implementation (from 5% to 15% of time), and their performance on these items will be evaluated each year. Staff will be expected to facilitate implementation of the projects they managed, and each staff person will also be responsible for involving certain types of external partners in the planning process.
2. The recommendations of LTA plans should be designed to align with infrastructure funding opportunities. Infrastructure recommendations, which often emerge from LTA plans, could be more carefully evaluated for feasibility and then directed explicitly to the most appropriate funding source. For example, more could be done to screen transportation projects during the planning process to determine whether they could ultimately be eligible for funding through CMAQ, STP, or other programs. While this would not guarantee funding availability, it would at least point project sponsors in the right direction for follow-up funding. The importance of infrastructure investment for plan implementation also suggests the need for additional regionally-programmed funding for this purpose.
3. Partner involvement has been shown to be very important. But most implementation activities involving partners, including all of the examples identified above, have occurred on a case-by-case basis. Typically, CMAP, the local community, or a partner organization identifies an opportunity for collaboration on implementation, and then relationships are formed around that opportunity. While this has worked for the examples above, there have certainly

been missed opportunities, and partner involvement could occur more systematically.

CMAP intends to identify common implementers – like state and county agencies, transportation agencies, civic organizations, or groups of private developers – and involve them in relevant projects, both while they are underway and after they are completed. The assignment of specializations to staff is meant to facilitate this and provide a more systematic approach to external involvement in the LTA program. While opportunistic implementation will still occur, it should be supported by a longer-term, consistent approach which manages relationships with common implementers.

4. Finally, local commitment is one of the key drivers of implementation success. Due to its importance, local commitment is covered in a separate section below.

Local commitment

Throughout the evaluation of the LTA program, local commitment has consistently emerged as the most important contributor to project success. As noted above, local leadership is needed for implementation to occur. Internal scoring of projects also demonstrated a high correlation between project outcomes and degree of local commitment: the LTA program's best projects have all been in communities that participated actively in the planning process, while those that turned out less well were typically in communities with lower degrees of ownership and commitment.

However, it is important to note that local commitment can be found in communities of all types. Community need – calculated based on a combination of median income, local tax base, and community size – has not been correlated with project outcomes. Since its inception, the LTA program has prioritized projects in higher-need communities. This has led to initial concerns about the ability of higher-need communities to conduct good planning projects and then implement them. However, CMAP has found that local commitment and community need are not mutually exclusive, and a number of higher-need communities have shown the ability to produce and implement good plans.

Moving forward, CMAP would like to conduct LTA projects only in communities with a high level of commitment. This implies screening carefully for commitment before selecting projects. It also may involve requiring formal commitments of some type from the project sponsor. It is also important to structure the project process as much as possible to increase the level of local commitment.

Recommendations

Several changes to the LTA program – some of them quite visible – are recommended to reflect the fundamental importance of local commitment to the program.

1. CMAP staff recommends beginning to require local match for participation in the LTA program. A local match contribution helps to demonstrate local commitment, and can increase local ownership of the project since local

resources are supporting it. Most programs like the LTA program have local match requirements, so this is not an unusual step.

However, it is important to structure the match requirement in a way that does not preclude the involvement of high-need communities. Many of the region's smaller, lower-income communities do not have the resources to commit a local match share. Therefore, a sliding scale of match requirements, which takes community need into account, will likely be the best option. Lower-income communities may need to demonstrate commitment in ways other than financial contributions.

2. In addition to requiring local match, experience has shown that commitment of time by the local sponsor is critical. Whether time is committed by staff, elected officials, or volunteers is unimportant – but some local partner needs to spend time providing local knowledge and contacts, participating in meetings, strategizing about priorities, reviewing deliverables, and many other activities. All of these require time commitments by a local representative. During the 2014 application evaluation process, CMAP staff informed applicants that they would need to spend at least 200 hours on a project for it to be successful. CMAP staff recommends that local sponsors formalize this time commitment as part of the local agreement with CMAP before the project begins.
3. Local commitment should be assessed when reviewing applications, and a high level of commitment should be a precondition to receiving assistance. Applications that show flaws during the selection process are likely to have significant problems later on. Therefore, CMAP should be more aggressive about screening projects before they are selected, as well as addressing emerging problems early in the scoping process. This year, CMAP conducted more extensive follow-up with some shortlisted projects, including follow-up calls with senior staff and site visits in some cases, to verify commitment; this should continue in future years. This will result in a highly competitive selection process, as applicants that do not demonstrate sufficient local commitment will be screened out.
4. CMAP should begin more extensive use of a new project type, a “planning priorities report,” which allows community needs and commitment to be assessed before taking on a significant planning effort. This already occurred in the selection of projects in 2014, and should occur in future years as well.

Program focus

The LTA program has deliberately been broad in scope, and has resulted in products of many different types that implement elements of GO TO 2040. To date, the most common projects in the LTA program have been comprehensive plans. Other common types include plans that focus on a specific corridor or area, as well as transportation plans. Some plans have been more topically specific, on issues like housing, water resources, sustainability, or economic

development. More recently, project types that help to implement past plans, like zoning updates or capital improvement plans, have become more common.

CMAP attempts to gauge local interest in project types and topics in several ways. The applications submitted to the LTA program serve as one indication of topics of interest to local sponsors. Also, CMAP conducts biannual municipal surveys to ask local governments what types of potential assistance would be most useful. This year, in addition to confirming that comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances, and similar products continue to be useful, interest was also expressed in capital improvement plans, efforts to redevelop specific sites, and general assistance with public engagement.

While the program has covered a variety of project types, it has been centered on land use and transportation. The most common GO TO 2040 recommendations that are addressed at a high level of detail in local plans relate to infill, mixed-use and context-sensitive development, and bicycle and pedestrian improvements. This is not surprising, as these recommendations of GO TO 2040 include a number of implementation actions targeted directly to local governments, who are the most common participants in the LTA program. Other recommendations involving intergovernmental coordination and maintaining existing transportation infrastructure are also commonly addressed.

In contrast, some elements of GO TO 2040 are not found in LTA plans as frequently. In some cases, like housing and water issues, these elements were more common during the program's first several years, when it was funded by a very flexible HUD grant. With increased funding restrictions since that time, coverage of some topics has been reduced. Other topics are not as relevant for inclusion in local plans. The GO TO 2040 recommendations on access to information and economic innovation, for example, are regional in scale, and are less relevant to be a focus of community-level plans. Finally, in one notable case, the evaluation of the LTA program found that freight – a significant agency priority – had typically not been a focus of LTA projects. This represents a missed opportunity that can be addressed in the future.

Recommendations

The breadth of the LTA program has been beneficial, and should be preserved. Several changes or adjustments are recommended to the program to preserve its broad focus.

1. Several topics have been identified for increased focus through the LTA program. Freight, as noted above, is a key part of our region's economy, and could be better supported through LTA projects at the local level. Two new projects that focus on freight were selected in 2014, so this is already beginning to be addressed. Another key topic is economic development and reinvestment; LTA plans frequently seek to attract development to communities that have suffered disinvestment. While this is already commonly addressed, CMAP believes that it could be strengthened with appropriate external partnerships. Finally, flooding and stormwater management are crucial issues in many communities, but have not been a major element of the LTA program. Due to external funding possibilities, there is now an opportunity to include

stormwater planning and disaster resilience as a regular part of comprehensive plans.

2. Several new product types have been selected this year, and these may become more common. These include capital improvement plans (new projects selected in Blue Island and Richton Park); a review of the development approval process (in Lemont); and planning priorities reports (in Calumet Park, Fox Lake, Steger, and near the 95th Street Red Line station in Chicago). Other project types emerged through the municipal survey that may make up future LTA projects. For example, many communities could benefit from training on public engagement techniques. Linked with the increased attention to economic development mentioned earlier, several communities also expressed interest in CMAP's assistance in attracting development to specific sites, which so far has not been a focus of the LTA program.
3. External funding is needed to support all the recommendations above. LTA plans most frequently address issues at the intersection of land use and transportation, which reflects CMAP's primary reliance on federal transportation funding to support the LTA program. Topics like workforce development, water resources, and others have often required CMAP to secure external funding before pursuing projects that focus on these elements. In FY 14, over \$900,000 was raised through competitive applications to federal, state, and philanthropic sources. CMAP has a similar target for external grants in FY 15, and considers this a necessary way to supplement the transportation funding that makes up the bulk of the agency's resources.

Conclusions

The evaluation process has confirmed the value of the LTA program. The program should be continued, with efforts to keep it diverse, responsive to local needs, supportive of higher-need communities, and geared toward implementation. Most changes recommended above are adjustments to the process meant to achieve the above goals. The only significant recommended program change involves local match, and staff will prepare a proposal to bring to the Board in early 2015 on this matter.

Discussion of the conclusions and recommendations of this memo is requested.

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