



MEMORANDUM

To: Working Committees

From: Bob Dean, Deputy Executive Director for Planning

Date: January-February 2017

Re: Local Technical Assistance (LTA) Program

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. As of January 2017, 140 projects have been completed through the LTA program, with 45 more currently underway. CMAP maintains a separate webpage for each completed project and many ongoing projects on the [LTA website](#).

Since its initiation, the LTA program has been a major CMAP activity. The program has devoted approximately \$20 million in consulting contracts and staff resources to assist communities with planning. The program is well-known across the region, and in many ways has been the most visible implementation of GO TO 2040. The plans produced through the LTA program have been 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 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 exceeds available resources by a wide margin; generally, only one-quarter to one-third of applications are able to be funded. Results of follow-up surveys with local partners have also been very positive, with over 90 percent of respondents expressing full satisfaction with the process and overall result of their LTA project.

The past year has seen some recent successes for the LTA program. Two projects, a community vision plan for Chinatown and a comprehensive plan for the City of Zion (contracted to Teska Associates), received awards from the Illinois chapter of the American Planning Association in October. Some innovative new projects took on new topics, such as sharing services (the Lower Fox Valley Partnering Initiative, between Oswego, Montgomery and Yorkville) and reimagining

rivers as community assets (the Fox River corridor study in Algonquin and Carpentersville, as well as the Our Great Rivers initiative of the Metropolitan Planning Council). And in partnership with the American Planning Association, CMAP received funding to begin to address the impacts of climate change in five pilot communities through ongoing LTA projects.

Despite these successes, the program has faced significant challenges in the past year, mainly due to state fiscal issues. The annual LTA call for projects was cancelled in 2016 due to financial uncertainty, and consultant-led projects were paused for the first half of 2016, as CMAP was unable to pay invoices. CMAP's financial position has stabilized in the second half of 2016, with receipt of state funding and a restructured dues program, so the LTA program can now be reinvigorated.

This moment presents a good opportunity to discuss the future of the LTA program, and CMAP staff will be leading discussions at each of CMAP's working committees in early 2017 for this purpose. Two items will be of particular focus: the new LTA call for projects, which will identify new projects to begin in late 2017 and early 2018; and advancing implementation of completed projects.

New call for projects

Staff expects to conduct a call for LTA projects in 2017, with a process and schedule similar to previous years. The call for projects will begin in early May, with applications due in late June or early July, and project selection complete by October. As usual, CMAP will coordinate with the RTA on the call for projects and project selection. Depending on resource availability and project size, CMAP staff expects to recommend selecting approximately 30-35 new projects.

The call for projects will be highly publicized, as it has been in the past. CMAP intends to host a one-day conference or workshop in May to publicize the program, provide an opportunity for past project sponsors to describe their work, highlight implementation successes, and help to generate ideas and form partnerships for new applications. This will be the largest single activity to publicize the program, but other outreach methods will also be used, including presentations to COGs and other groups of prospective applicants, email updates, and an information session with both call-in and in-person attendance options. The review of applications will involve stakeholders including CMAP committees, Counties and COGs, transit agencies, nonprofit partners, and similar groups.

While the general structure of the new call for LTA projects will remain consistent, there are some new areas of emphasis. Project types have evolved over the years, with fewer comprehensive plans and more projects that address development regulations, build local capacity, and otherwise move toward implementation. The new call for projects also provides an opportunity to link to the priorities of ON TO 2050. Some new topics in ON TO 2050, like community capacity, inclusive growth, stormwater management, and climate resilience, can be addressed locally through the LTA program. Other areas of emphasis, like improving suburban mobility and addressing freight, are already part of the LTA program but can be strengthened.

As in the past, project types are constrained by funding eligibility. While CMAP's federal transportation funds provide broad eligibility for projects that affect transportation or land use, some specialized projects require outside funding to cover all or part of their cost. CMAP currently has been awarded grants to address many of these, from sources like the IEPA (water quality and watershed planning), NOAA (climate resilience), Cook County CDBG-DR (stormwater), and the Chicago Community Trust (housing). Other funding sources are currently being pursued.

Implementation of completed plans

The purpose of the LTA program is not simply to produce good plans, but to achieve positive results in the communities that they cover, making implementation an important follow up activity. As part of an [evaluation of the LTA program](#) in 2014, several changes were made to support implementation of completed projects. These have been helpful, but have raised additional questions about CMAP's role in implementation.

The purpose of this section of the memo is to begin a discussion with CMAP's stakeholders to develop answers to these questions. This memo summarizes the results of the 2014 program evaluation that relate to implementation; describes how implementation is currently supported; and poses several questions about future implementation directions.

Program evaluation results

The 2014 LTA evaluation made a number of conclusions and recommendations concerning implementation, summarized below:

- Leadership on implementation needs to be locally driven. It is evident that local commitment – defined as a combination of responsiveness, energy, leadership, and willingness to use plan recommendations for day-to-day prioritization and decision-making – is the primary driver of implementation.
Accomplishments: A local match was put in place to ensure local commitment, and a more intensive screening of commitment was added to the project proposal evaluation process.
- CMAP should have a role in implementation of completed LTA plans. While the primary purpose of the LTA program is, and should remain, the production of local plans, the agency should also try to advance the implementation of completed projects.
Accomplishments: Staff resources began to be devoted to implementation, as described further below.
- Simply following up with project sponsors is valuable. 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.
Accomplishments: Implementation updates on projects completed recently (within two years) are prepared quarterly, and updates on all completed projects are prepared each July, though quality depends on sponsor responsiveness.
- Commonly, CMAP's role in implementation has involved aligning community needs with available resources from other external partners. External partners often have resources and responsibilities that position them as implementers. The evaluation recommended more systematic involvement of common implementers – like state and county agencies, transportation agencies, civic organizations, or groups of private

developers – in relevant projects, both while they are underway and after they are completed.

Accomplishments: Partner involvement in each project is tracked and updated regularly, with new partners added as implementation priorities are identified. As project completion approaches, partner involvement in implementation is discussed, and potential implementers who have not been involved are invited to participate. Also, CMAP staff conduct regular discussions on the LTA program with common implementers, like IDOT, transit agencies, and nonprofit partners.

- Even if time per project is fairly limited, the number of completed projects (nearly 140) means that even modest commitments per project add up to a large total. Devoting resources to implementation will inevitably reduce the new projects that can be taken on through the LTA program – but is preferable to producing large volumes of new plans that are not implemented. The evaluation recommended balancing implementation of completed projects with continued production of new plans.

Accomplishments: CMAP focuses on small-scale implementation activities, as explained in the description of current practice below.

- Finally, the evaluation focused only on staff-led projects and commitment of staff time. This was a good place to start, but now further thought is needed about involvement of consultants and commitment of financial resources.

Accomplishments: This has not been addressed. See the final section of this memo for discussion of this issue.

Current practice

For a subset of completed projects, staff takes a more active approach than quarterly follow-ups. Due to the volume of completed projects, prioritization is necessary; attempting to actively engage with the sponsors of all 140 completed projects would be futile. Therefore, as projects near completion, a small team of staff reviews the potential for CMAP to have an active role in their implementation. Several factors are discussed, including: whether the community is interested and responsive; whether there are clear recommendations that CMAP can help to advance; and whether the local sponsor actually needs CMAP assistance in follow-through. For projects that meet these factors, a short list of potential implementation activities is developed and confirmed with the local sponsor. This process is conducted for newly completed projects, and older projects are also periodically reviewed.

Implementation activities taken on by CMAP have included the following:

- Linking communities with other public agencies. Many communities need assistance making the right contacts at state or regional agencies. CMAP has played an intermediary role in these cases, in terms of identifying the best points of contact, setting up and facilitating meetings, and ensuring follow-up afterwards.
- Linking communities with nonprofits that can provide assistance. For example, CMAP recently worked with the Active Transportation Alliance on a pedestrian safety workshop in Hanover Park as a follow-up to a project completed several years ago.
- Linking communities with developers. While this is still in the planning phase, CMAP is working with the Urban Land Institute to host information sessions with interested developers for plans that recommended real estate development.
- Assisting with applications to funders. CMAP has helped several communities submit applications to philanthropic, federal, or state funding sources, often with success.

- Training. Through an arrangement with the Illinois chapter of the American Planning Association (APA-IL), CMAP has sponsored plan commissioner trainings in multiple communities following completion, and is exploring a larger role.
- Research. In some cases, communities have follow-up questions sparked by a planning process that CMAP can help to answer. For example, CMAP developed a how-to guide on façade enhancement programs for New Lenox, which not only helps that specific community but also adds to the agency’s base of knowledge.
- Other types of assistance have also been provided in a few cases. CMAP has assisted with proposal review and consultant selection, and frequently serves on steering committees for follow-up projects.

These are small-scale activities, and can be accomplished by a small team of staff. CMAP has one staff person who leads the implementation team, and several others who participate. Far more resources are devoted to new projects; the amount of time spent on these implementation activities is about 5% of overall time spent on the program.

Other implementation activities are larger in size, and require the community to submit a separate follow-up LTA application. A common example is a zoning project that follows a comprehensive plan. CMAP is currently doing this in several communities, including Bensenville, Chicago Heights, and Harvard. Projects of this magnitude fall outside of the small-scale implementation assistance that CMAP regularly provides.

Questions for discussion

The current level of staff resources devoted to implementation allows staff to push progress in small ways, without excessive time expenditure. However, questions remain concerning the expenditure of resources other than staff time – namely, funding – on project implementation. To date, all implementation activities have been achieved by staff, or by partner organizations with no cost to CMAP. Commitment of financial resources should be discussed in two contexts:

- Some LTA projects (about one-third) are contracted to consulting firms. For these, the consulting firm is the primary project manager and contact for the community, and is positioned to identify, prioritize, and assist with implementation activities. It may sometimes make sense for consulting firms to continue their involvement with a community through implementation.
- In other cases, recommended actions are beyond CMAP staff capacity, and instead require commitment of funding to accomplish. For example, several projects in municipalities in northeastern Lake County recommended coordination on economic development activities. In response, a multijurisdictional group of Lake County communities have taken steps to do just this, including jointly contracting with a consulting firm for marketing and new business attraction, and have requested that CMAP contribute a portion of the funding for this effort. In this case, commitment of CMAP staff time would not be helpful, and financial resources are necessary.

From one perspective, there is an argument for CMAP to commit resources of all types to project implementation, just as it does for the LTA program overall. Sometimes plan implementation is best accomplished through commitment of staff time, but sometimes other

resources are necessary. Staff may lack necessary expertise or time availability, or may have less knowledge of the community and its needs than a consulting firm.

On the other hand, commitment of funding for implementation to consulting firms, or directly to the community, opens the agency to difficult decisions. There will be great interest in receiving financial implementation assistance. (There may also be interest in CMAP funding community staff time; CMAP does not recommend this.) Implementation activities are typically shorter-term and more opportunistic than a full plan, so a regular, competitive selection process would miss opportunities for short-term action. Unless there is a clear way of determining what activities to fund in what communities, concerns about fairness will emerge.

Committee feedback on a number of issues is requested:

- Are there any overall flaws or problems in the agency's approach to LTA implementation to date?
- Is there value in committing financial resources to implementation beyond staff time – namely, direct grants to communities?
- Similarly, is there value in contracting with consulting firms after project completion to have them assist with implementation?
- If so, what kinds of standards might be used to make funding decisions? Options include: consistency with the adopted plan and with GO TO 2040; demonstrated local commitment; community need; feasibility of the proposed activity and likelihood of success; eligibility of the proposed activity within the restrictions of CMAP's funding sources; size of funding request; and others.

CMAP staff does not have a proposal yet for how to answer these questions. Committee discussion is requested on the initial ideas presented in this memo, which will inform a later staff proposal.

ACTION REQUESTED: Discussion.