Appendix D

Content Analysis: Correspondence and Comments Received for June 30, 2020 Public Hearing to Adopt TIP

Introduction

Leading up to the June 30th, 2020 virtual public hearing on the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) adoption, the MPO received 30 emails, 3 Facebook comments, and 1 voicemail message regarding the TIP. At the hearing, 28 individuals signed up to provide public comment and 8 individuals donated their time to speakers, bringing the total number of individuals represented to 36. In addition to this, there were 5 speakers who called in during the hearing to speak, bringing the total to 41 individuals.

NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to code the content of all emails, voicemails, Facebook comments submitted on the TIP ‘events’ page, and public comments made during the public hearing. The correspondence received does not necessarily constitute a representative sample of the general public.

To inform Hillsborough County residents about the TIP and engage their input on funded projects and priorities for future funding, MPO staff initiated an engagement campaign which began by mailing hearing notices in both English and Spanish to more than 6,700 property owners near major projects, placing legal ads in newspapers of general circulation (including one with a Hispanic readership and one with an African-American readership), and creating a Facebook event to solicit comments.

This year, due to public health concerns from the COVID-19 pandemic, the public hearing was presented in a virtual meeting format using the Go-To-Webinar videoconferencing service. Participants could use either phone or internet connectivity which, on the one hand, could facilitate better engagement among residents with a connection and, on the other hand, may effectively limit engagement for those without. To inform the public of the non-traditional videoconferencing format, MPO staff advertised the hearing agenda on the Plan Hillsborough website which provided a link to register in advance to the meeting. A hotline was established to assist the public with virtual meeting registration before the meeting started. The effectiveness of virtual meetings remains to be seen, though some commenters remarked on its novelty, with some even prompting dialogue with MPO board members about the effectiveness.

General Overview of Email & Facebook Comments

Many of the email comments received were templated responses that had been pre-prepared for commenters. In journalistic parlance, pre-prepared letters are often disdainfully referred to as “astroturf,” which reinforces the perception that such responses are “canned” and may be indicative of an artificial grass-roots campaign. Advocates of templated responses, on the other

---

hand, argue that pre-prepared letters are a useful tool for encouraging public participation and staying on-message.\textsuperscript{2,3}

A content analysis of the emails and Facebook comments received in advance of the TIP Public Hearing mainly represented the following themes - “traffic”, “transit”, “item”, “projects”, “public” and “section”.

1. A majority of the emails received were from commenters who wanted to remove specific projects related to Interstate expansion as part of the Tampa Bay Next (TBNNext) project from the TIP. Other commenters requested the addition of projects to prioritize transit over highways. They suggested the Board should follow the recommendations of the MPO Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) members from their June 10th CAC meeting. Similar comments were expressed by over 11 commenters through Facebook and mails.
   a. One of the commenters asked that the MPO strike line items 32 and 33 from the TIP Table 2: Candidates for New Funding (TBNNext Section 7 from Downtown Interchange from north of MLK to Bearss and TBNNext Section 6 Downtown Interchange (DTI) operational improvements, respectively) and to strike FDOT projects, FPN 434045 2 and FPN 431746 2 (TBNNext Section 5 for the I-275 section from south of Lois Ave to east of Hillsborough River and TBNNext Section 8 from I-4/ Selmon Connector to east of Branch Forbes Rd, respectively). In addition, they requested that the FDOT conduct traffic studies and traffic counts and provide updated future traffic demand projections and to take into account a change in the telecommuting pattern of workers due to the pandemic.
   b. Another Facebook commenter requested that the TBNNext project be replaced by projects focusing on robust public transit, transit-oriented development, affordable housing, supporting local business, affordable housing, historic preservation, sustainability and resilience.

2. The second most frequently occurring theme was transit and/or public transit.
   a. One of the commenters who resided at Bayshore and Howard highlighted the need for providing public transit to connect Tampa International Airport to Downtown Tampa.
   b. Another email requested that the MPO encourage HART and TBARTA to plan, implement and operate regional transit for the Tampa Bay Region. They also requested that the authorities should consider a phased regional transit to connect USF to Downtown Tampa on the CSX corridor.
   c. There was another email received that said a “regional rapid transit and transit along the CSX corridor would provide the level of accessibility needed to complement a more robust local bus service in the counties of our region.”

3. Another auto-generated theme that appeared frequently was “section”. This theme likely emerged in reference to TBNExt projects that some commenters requested to be removed from the current TIP.

a. In addition to striking line items 32, 33 and FDOT project numbers FPN 434045 2 (Section 5 - I-275 (SR 93) From S of Lois Ave to E of Hillsborough River) and FPN 431746 2 (Section 8 - I-4 from I-4/Selmon Connector to E of Branch Forbes Rd). There were additional requests to remove FDOT projects with FPN 433821 2 (section 6 of TBNExt Downtown Interchange) and FPN 431821 2 (section 7 of north of MLK to north of Hillsborough River). The email also requested prioritizing people over cars, transit over highways and unification over diversification.

Compared to TIP public hearings in previous years, there were fewer email and Facebook comments submitted to the MPO in 2020. In 2019, there were over 120 emails, 38 Facebook comments, 3 voicemails and about 68 speakers who had signed up to speak at the public hearing; while in 2020, there were 30 emails, 3 Facebook comments and 1 voicemail, in addition to the 41 speakers who signed up and called in directly to speak at the hearing. Figure 1, shown below, is a word cloud indicating the 100 most frequently occurring concepts found in the emails, voicemail messages and Facebook comments. Larger words appear more frequently than smaller words. This is consistent with the comments presented to strike the some of the sections from TBNExt project.

**Figure 1: Word Cloud, graduated by frequency of appearance in emails, voicemails, and Facebook comments received prior to the TIP hearing**
Preparing the Data

All of the comments received, whether in writing or verbal, have been treated as raw data that must be prepared as an input to the NVivo software. Content analyses of TIP comments and correspondence have been completed using NVivo since 2016 and, over that time, there have been several changes to the data preparation methodology. Initiating incremental changes to data preparation, analysis, and interpretation is common in qualitative research. As Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) state, “qualitative analysis is a reflective process. There is no ‘step 1, 2, 3, done!’ linear progression in the analysis. This means that identifying and condensing meaning units, coding, and categorizing are not one-time events. It is a continuous process of coding and categorizing then returning to the raw data to reflect on your initial analysis.”

Due to the size of the dataset and limited staff resources, it would be time-prohibitive to fix misspellings found in each item of correspondence. Practical handbooks and guides to conducting qualitative research often advise that misspellings be corrected using spelling correction tools and language modeling in order to reduce errors from unanalyzable cases. For this supplementary analysis, however, deviations from expected inputs have not been corrected for the aforementioned reason. Autocoding is a technique that identifies and generates codes based on syntax, word frequency, and word uniqueness. In a dataset with few items of correspondence, reliability may be compromised. To account for this limitation of the software, an assessment and validation technique known as “triangulation” was applied to establish a loose consensus of the themes based on “examination [by] multiple observers, theories, methods, and data sources”.

NVivo is also limited in its capability to autocode pictures, diagrams and hand-drawn maps. While it is possible for codes to be manually applied to images, the additional insights gained from coding images compared to the effort required render this impractical – not to mention that coded imagery introduces additional problems of bias, credibility, validity, and confirmability.

The emails received were manually reviewed to make sure that they were free of spelling errors and complete before inputting into the software. Long email chains and partial conversations could introduce the possibility data processing errors if the emails are imputed to NVivo as-is. To reduce this risk, email threads were manually scrubbed in an attempt to eliminate duplicate data. The transcription of comments made during the hearing was also scrubbed to remove personal identifiers including names of the speakers to prevent NVivo from generating a code. There were a few speakers who had sent emails and comments ahead of the hearing in addition

---

to signing up to speak at the hearing. In order to be more inclusive and account for the additional issues, they were counted as separate comments and emails.

**Themes Emerging from Email & Facebook Comments**

A sample of the most common themes emerging from the emails and Facebook posts received include:

- **Traffic**
  - “Request FDOT to Conduct studies”
  - “Traffic studies”
  - “Traffic Forecasts with COVID-19”
  - “Traffic Congestion”
  - “Traffic Counts”

- **Transit**
  - “Regional Rapid Transit”
  - “Public Transit Options”
  - “Transit Options”
  - “Transit Oriented Development”

- **Public**
  - “Public Transit”
  - “Robust Public Transportation”
  - “Public Hearing”
  - “Public Participation”

- **Projects**
  - “Prioritize Multimodal Projects”
  - “Improvement Projects”
  - “Complete Street Projects”
  - “Transportation Projects”

This year witnessed changes in travel patterns and commuting to work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the commenters, therefore, requested that the FDOT and MPO conduct updated traffic counts due to travel restrictions and increase in telecommuting. One commenter anticipates a “paradigm shift from office-based work to a more remote, telecommuting model”.

Below is a diagram showing the number and frequency of the word “traffic” appearing in the comments in Figure 2. The word “traffic” appeared in 16 files and was referenced 58 times in the emails and comments.
FIGURE 2: Textual Word Tree of the comments related to ‘traffic and its stemmed words. The larger font size indicates that a sub-theme emerged, which was often stemmed to the predominant theme.
Some of the comments related to transit include requests to provide additional transit services from Downtown Tampa to Tampa International Airport and to connect to other important destinations within Tampa, to prioritize transit over highways, focus on a robust transit system and transit oriented development; and the request to include Regional Rapid Transit as a regional priority in the upcoming TIP. The figure below represents the number and the ways in which the word “transit” was referenced. “Transit” was mentioned in 13 emails and had 82 references as shown in Figure 3 below.
Another theme that appeared similarly was “public” referenced in about 14 emails and comments for over 30 times. It was mostly related to “public transit” with a need to focus on robust public transit and transit connections. “Public” was also used to describe “public participation” and “public hearing” etc., as shown in Figure 4.

The word “project” was referenced in about 19 emails. Since it was a common term for any transportation related project, the word was referenced in multiple instances including the need to prioritize Complete Street projects, Regional Rapid transit projects, multimodal projects, Vision Zero projects etc. There were also multiple references to remove certain projects from the upcoming TIP and add others. Another term that was often used interchangeably with projects was “studies”, with references to traffic studies, engineering studies, traffic volume studies, speed studies etc. The various references to the word “project” are shown in Figure 5 below.
"Safety" and "operational improvements" emerged as other predominant themes with emails concerning pedestrian and bicycle safety and requests to focus on traffic improvement projects that address safety. One of the comments described the importance of safety and the need for sidewalks to prevent them from walking on the street into oncoming traffic.

**General Overview of Live Comments and Emails**

The FY 2020-2021 TIP hearing was presented in virtual format with about 36 speakers signed up to speak, including those who dedicated their time for other speakers. Some of the speakers who attended the Go-To-Webinar expressed concern about job losses, and decreased job opportunities; particularly due to the current COVID-19 pandemic situation. A couple of the commenters pointed out the negative effects of induced demand and the impacts on congestion due to more lanes on the highways. It was added that people should anticipate an increase in their travel time and plan their trip accordingly to account for congestion, rather than adding Interstate lanes. This echoed the comments made through the emails and Facebook, that highlighted the negative effects of Interstate highways through cities that caused the destruction
of many neighborhoods. In addition, it was pointed out that Express Toll Lanes would not bring in the projected revenue nor help with congestion.

Of the emails and comments received, about 25% referenced the challenges due to the COVID-19 situation; and observed a paradigm shift in travel patterns as a result of the reduced travel and telecommuting trends in the future. In addition, one of the commenters observed reduction in air pollution due to reduced vehicles on the highway and experienced noticeable improvement in his ability to breathe. These comments also reflected a growing interest in multimodal options and a need to focus on regional rapid transit to serve the growing needs of the community. The comments that were presented during the live webinar were similar to the ones presented in the email correspondence where commenters had requested the MPO and FDOT conduct traffic forecasts and updated traffic counts in anticipation of the reduced traffic volumes resulting from a shift in travel patterns from working at office to remote working and telecommuting trends in the future.

**General Overview of Public Comments at the TIP Public Hearing**

The TIP Public Hearing for Fiscal Year 2020-2021 was held in a virtual format as a Go-To-Webinar. The Go-To-Webinar was recorded and was made available to the public through YouTube following the hearing. The link to the virtual hearing is [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAAyfwbopQw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAAyfwbopQw). It is to be noted that although there were many opportunities provided to the public to express their concerns at the public hearing, there were still barriers that reduced effective public participation for those who did not have access to internet, phones or computers.

Following MPO staff’s presentation of the Transportation Improvement Program Annual Update, public comment was offered prior to Board action on the TIP.

Figure 6, shown below, is a word cloud indicating the 100 most frequently occurring concepts from the comments presented during the hearing. Larger words appear more frequently than smaller words. This is consistent with the themes mentioned in the comments made at the public hearing that requested the MPO to focus on transit and multimodal projects instead of Interstate expansion.
FIGURE 6: WORD CLOUD, GRADUATED BY FREQUENCY OF APPEARANCE IN PUBLIC COMMENTS AND WRITTEN COMMENTS RECEIVED DURING THE TIP HEARING

Discussion

In general, a majority of the comments and the emails received were regarding the FY 2020-2021 TIP priorities for the highway expansion as part of the Tampa Bay Next project; segregation of neighborhoods and destruction of minority communities due to the highways, multimodal improvements and transportation demand strategies, economic growth and support for local businesses. The FY 2020-2021 TIP hearing had more comments regarding the Tampa Bay Next initiative than last year. There were concerns about the possible shift in travel patterns due to COVID-19 pandemic, which would result in reduced traffic on the highways in the future. Approximately half of the emails and comments supported the projects focusing on multimodal improvements like Green Spine Cycle Track, Trail Connections and CSX study. In particular, 12 emails and speakers advised the MPO Board to adopt the TIP as presented. On the other hand, more than 50% of the comments opposed Interstate expansion, and the addition of toll lanes to the highways. Out of the emails and comments received, 10 emails and 3 Facebook comments and 14 commenters requested the Board approve the recommendations of the CAC presented at the June 10th meeting. In general, 40 commenters and emails expressed their concern for the negative impacts caused due to the Interstate expansion, Express toll lanes and the segregation of communities caused due to the highways. Commenters also requested that the MPO explore transit options as an alternative to roadway capacity projects. Finally, there were concerns expressed over the lack of bicycle and pedestrian safety measures and commenters requested the MPO focus on projects to improve multimodal safety.

There were a few motions that were made by the Board but failed to get adopted as noted below:
• Motion to remove line item 32 from Table 2: Candidates for New Funding - to widen I-275 from north of MLK Blvd to north of Bearss Ave that failed with a 7 to 8 vote.
• Motion to remove entryway to 14th and 15th Streets in Ybor City and reconfigure it to not allow for that entry, which failed with a 6 to 10 vote.
• Motion referencing the CAC recommendations for removing section 5 of the TBNext project to remove the operational improvements on I-275 from south of Lois Ave to east of Hillsborough River, which failed with a 4 to 12 vote.
• Motion to remove line item 46 from Table 2: Candidates for New Funding – from HART with a request for $5 million for automated vehicle facilities and infrastructure, which failed with a 7 to 9 vote.

The final TIP was approved with a 13-3 vote with recommendations to give a higher priority to the CSX project to study the possibility of converting the track from freight to passenger rail that passed with a 9 to 7 vote.