

1

Introduction



2016 Regional Transportation Plan

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Franklin County is the most rural county in the Commonwealth and as a result, transportation planning and its implementation pose interesting challenges. Its sparse population and large geographical area naturally constrain many modes of travel beyond that of the private automobile. The large area that the transportation network covers also makes it difficult to efficiently provide improvements. In spite of these obstacles, Franklin County has had a very successful track record in maintaining, improving, and preserving its transportation system. The Franklin County Regional Transportation Plan, which is updated every four years, helps to provide a clear vision of the county and prioritizes its needs in a context that is suitable for the rural nature of the region.

This Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) update focuses on the importance of providing safe, efficient mobility for residents, while taking into account the rural character of the county. The RTP specifically emphasizes the following goals: preservation and improvement of the existing transportation system, while also maintaining the region's scenic and natural resources; providing residents healthy transportation options to the singly-occupied vehicle; strengthening the local economy and industries; and improving the region's livability and sustainability.

As in years past, safety is a major focus for this update to the RTP. The safety of the regional transportation system has been and will continue to be a high priority when evaluating and setting the agenda for regional transportation projects and activities. For this reason, projects that will make the existing system safer, more efficient, more secure and better able to support the goals of this RTP are prioritized in the region rather than those that will create new roads or add capacity to the region's roadways.

Through the completion of this Regional Transportation Plan update, the accompanying public participation process, and other planning work conducted by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), it is clear that there is a very strong interest in expanding the transportation system to include additional healthy transportation options to the singly-occupied vehicle.

Specifically, there is a very strong demand for expanded public transit services either through the establishment of new routes to unserved areas of the region, or the initiation of additional service runs on existing routes. This has been strongly vocalized through the public outreach conducted in partnership with the Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA)

for the FRTA's Comprehensive Service Analysis. The on-going expansion of the Franklin County Bikeway has prompted increased interest in bicycling as a healthy transportation option. Additionally, the establishment of new park-and-ride facilities throughout the county and the return of passenger rail services to the region has further heightened interest in other modes of transportation.

During the development of the 2016 Regional Transportation Plan, a particular emphasis was placed on public participation and outreach. Chapter 2 details the public participation process that was undertaken during the creation of this update. The Franklin County Transportation Planning Organization (TPO) recognizes that there are finite financial resources available to advance the recommendations of this report. Therefore, in order to ensure that the recommendations are realistic, a financial component has been included as part of this plan.

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (referred to as the FRCOG) serves the towns of the Franklin County region in western Massachusetts. The FRCOG integrates regional and local planning, human service advocacy and coordination, and the provision of municipal services such as cooperative purchasing and building inspection to advance the following regional goals:

- Balancing economic development with the protection of natural and cultural resources, and with the rural character and heritage of the region;
- Ensuring the most economical creation and delivery of public services in a rural region comprised of many political subdivisions; Building healthier communities by developing and connecting broad-based coalitions, which raise the level of expectations for community achievement.



The Franklin Regional Council of Governments offices

The FRCOG advocates on behalf of its member communities at the state and federal level to ensure that funding, programs, and policies are sensitive and respond to the rural nature, economic strengths, and human and natural resources of the region.

Additionally, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments serves as one of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' thirteen (13) Regional Planning Agencies and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO). An MPO consists of a Committee of Signatories, who together makes decisions about transportation planning goals, projects, priorities, and funding. In Franklin County, this group is referred to as the Franklin County Transportation Planning Organization (TPO). In its role as a TPO member, the FRCOG follows federal transportation planning regulations, including the establishment of a citizen advisory group to participate in transportation planning activities. The FRCOG staff is responsible for coordinating and working with the other TPO members to develop, implement, and routinely update the Regional Transportation Plan for Franklin County, as well as provide a wide range of other planning services.

The Franklin County TPO is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was executed in 2006 and updated in 2010. As defined by the MOU, the TPO's committee membership contains nine members including the following representatives:

- The Secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) (to act as the Chair of the FCTPO);
- The Administrator of the Highway Division of MassDOT;
- The Chair of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments Executive Committee;
- The Chair of the Franklin Regional Transit Authority;
- The Franklin Regional Council of Governments Regionally Elected Official;
- The Mayor of Greenfield; and
- Three Franklin County Sub-Regional Appointments (one from the West County, one from Central County, and one from the East County sections of Franklin County as defined in the MOU).

The MOU defines that the FCTPO shall have the responsibilities of developing, reviewing, and adopting the region's annual transportation Unified Planning Work Program, the Regional Transportation Plan, the Transportation Improvement Program, and air quality conformity determinations. The MOU further states that the FCTPO shall have the responsibility of meeting all of the provisions of the federal 3C (Continuing, Cooperative, Comprehensive) Transportation Planning Process that may include: the initiation of studies, evaluation and recommendation of transportation improvements, and the programming of funds for transportation projects in the region for which funding is sought for implementation. The MOU also states the FCTPO shall be the forum for cooperative decision-making by officials of local government, regional planning commission, regional transit authority, and state officials representing state transportation agencies.

The MOU defines that the Franklin Regional Planning Board (FRPB) will act as an advisory board to the FCTPO in order to ensure that all transportation decisions are considered within the context of comprehensive regional planning. The composition of the FRPB includes a Select Board and Planning Board member designee from each town as well as 18 at-large members. The FRCOG is, by state designation and consistent with applicable federal transportation laws, the primary transportation planning staff for the FCTPO and also serves as the principal source of transportation planning for local and regional transportation projects.

Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21)

The federal legislation that guides transportation planning (including Regional Transportation Plans) and projects is called Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21). On July 6, 2012, President Obama signed MAP-21 into law as the latest federal transportation legislation, which guarantees funding for highways, highway safety, and public transportation. MAP-21 replaces three previous landmark federal transportation legislations: the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) of 2005, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) enacted in June of 1998, and the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991. ISTEA revolutionized the planning and funding of highway and mass transit construction, maintenance, and operations throughout the United States. TEA-21 confirmed the federal government's commitment to establish a nationwide transportation system that reflects the country's environmental, social, and energy goals. SAFETEA-LU further built on the foundation of these two previous acts. MAP-21 transforms the policy and programmatic framework for investments by creating a new, streamlined and performance-based program. It also builds on many of the highway, transit, bike, and pedestrian programs and policies established under the previous transportation legislations.

MAP-21 addresses the many challenges facing our transportation system today, such as improving safety, reducing traffic congestions, improving efficiency in freight movement, increasing intermodal connectivity, and protecting the environment, as well as laying the groundwork for addressing future challenges. MAP-21 expands the National Highway System to incorporate principal arterials not previously included. It consolidates the overall program structure into a smaller number of broader core programs. It focuses on a multi-modal program that promotes sustainability and economic development.¹ This Regional Transportation Plan was developed within the framework of MAP-21's requirements and focuses on the priorities of this transportation legislation.

¹ United State Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, A *Summary of Highway Provisions in MAP-21*, FHWA website, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/map21/summaryinfo.cfm>, 2015.

The Regional Transportation Plan

MAP-21 requires that each MPO complete a regional transportation plan and update it at least every four years. MAP-21 further specifies that:

“...the Plan and TIPs for each metropolitan areas shall provide for the development and integrated management and operation of transportation systems and facilities (including accessible pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities) that will function as an intermodal transportation system for the metropolitan planning area and as an integral part of an intermodal transportation system for the State and the United States... The long-range plan must describe the performance measures and targets used in assessing system performance and progress in achieving the performance targets.”

In summary, a Regional Transportation Plan is a planning document that details existing conditions, identifies current deficiencies, and projects future needs related to transportation systems for a particular geographical area. The RTP reviews all types of transportation, including vehicular, rail, air, bus, bicycle, and pedestrian. The RTP is intended to set the vision for the region’s transportation system and is updated at least every four years. The update is an opportunity to review and update transportation priorities within the region. The Regional Transportation Plan is required to forecast the transportation needs of the region for the next twenty-five years (the year 2040 for this plan) and it is required to do so in the context of financial constraint. This Plan also establishes performance measures so that future progress in meeting the region’s goals can be assessed.

The recommendations in the Franklin Regional Transportation Plan provide the framework for transportation projects in the county. It is from this Plan that projects are chosen to be designed, funded, and implemented. Historically, the region has been very successful with the rate at which the RTP’s recommendations have been implemented. Table 1-1 shows that out of the twenty recommendations from the previous 2012 Regional Transportation Plan, seven have already been completed and another six are in progress or are nearly completed.

Top 20 Recommendations from 2012 Regional Transportation Plan*

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	Recommendation	Status	Notes
1	Initiate Passenger Rail service from New Haven, CT to St. Albans, VT with a stop in Greenfield	Completed	
2	Construct a Park-and-Ride Lot near I-91 exit 24 in Whatley	Completed	
3	Acquire Scenic Easements along Designated Scenic Byways	Completed / Ongoing	
4	Realign I-91 Northbound Exit 24 Ramp Realignment	Completed	
5	Construct improvements to better accommodate slow-moving vehicles on Rt. 2/Greenfield Mountain	Completed	
6	Replace retaining walls on Route 116 along the South River.	Completed	
7	Create additional Park & Ride lots throughout the County.	Completed / Ongoing	
8	Construct Route 2 West Safety Improvements including protected turn lanes at Colrain-Shelburne Road and South Maple Street in Shelburne, and Traffic Calming in Charlemont Village Center	In Progress	Charlemont Village Ctr Traffic Calming is in design. A study was conducted at Colrain-Shelburne Rd and improvement is in design.
9	Reconstruct Rt. 2 in Charlemont, including several culverts	In Progress	Design is underway and waiting funding.
10	Expand Bus Service throughout the county	In Progress	A comprehensive service analysis is underway to evaluate ways to improve service.
11	Increase frequency & extend bus service hours during evenings and weekends.	In Progress	A comprehensive service analysis is underway to evaluate ways to improve service.
12	Advance Route 2 Safety Improvements in Ervingside, Farley, Erving Center, and Gill/Greenfield	In Progress	Improvements have been completed in Ervingside and Farley and under design for Gill/Greenfield, Erving Center, and Erving.
13	Implement Safety and Traffic Flow Improvements along Route 2 between the I-91/Route 2 Rotary and Home Depot in Greenfield	In Progress	A Road Safety Audit was completed and resulted in additional recommendations.
14	Plan for Passenger Rail from Franklin County to Boston	Preliminary Planning Phase	Monitoring of rail planning efforts is ongoing.
15	Rehabilitate the General Pierce Bridge	Preliminary Planning Phase	Rehab of the Gill-Montague Bridge must be completed first, which is now done.
16	Create a parking garage near the Regional Transit Center to facilitate regional commuting and downtown revitalization.	Preliminary Planning Phase	Existing vacant building on site has been scheduled to be demolished.
17	Construct a Bikeway to connect the downtowns of Orange and Athol	Preliminary Planning Phase	Preliminary feasibility studies have been completed.
18	Construct a sidewalk to Mohawk Trail Regional High School along Rt. 112 and North St.	Preliminary Planning Phase	MassDOT & Buckland agreed to shoulder widening instead of sidewalk construction (due to snow clearing issues).
19	Create an Erving-Wendell Bike Path to connect Erving Center with Farley and Ervingside	Preliminary Planning Phase	A feasibility study was completed in 2012. Private property issues that will need further investigation.
20	Promote ridesharing in the region	Not yet started	

*Projects are not listed in any order of priority. Status as of January 2015.