



Nebraska Department of Roads
**Innovation
Task Force**

Innovation Task Force Supports Idea of County Bridge Program and Applauds Expanded Project Prioritization Outreach

In its second meeting, the Nebraska Department of Roads (NDOR) Innovation Task Force gathered on February 11, 2016, to discuss LB960 (the Transportation Innovation Act) – in particular, how to address the condition of county bridges in Nebraska. An update on the expanded Build Nebraska Act (BNA) project prioritization process was provided, including recent stakeholder input, and Task Force members offered their insights in response to the input. Sociodemographic and economic trends were also briefly explored in anticipation of future Task Force discussions regarding how transportation should change and adapt to serve Nebraskans and the economy today and into the future.

Task Force offers suggestions for county bridge program

Local bridges: aging and not designed for today's farm equipment. Steve Riehle, Hall County Engineer and President of the Nebraska Association of County Engineers, County Highway Superintendents and County Surveyors (a section of the Nebraska Association of County Officials, NACO), provided a local perspective of county bridge concerns, primarily: 1) counties do not have the financial resources to keep up with aging county bridges and their declining structural condition; and, 2) even if counties could address the immediate structural deficiencies, the fundamental challenge remains that county bridges weren't designed to carry today's heavier and wider modern farm equipment. Steve noted that counties sometimes use "practical designs", such as pipes and culverts instead of a full bridge replacement which allows counties to keep their bridges and roads open most of the year. These approaches are more cost effective, though occasional overtopping may occur following a heavy rain.

Other states initiate innovative approaches. NDOR State Bridge Engineer Mark Traynowicz explained that in recent years surrounding states have begun investing state funds in local bridge programs as they are faced with similar challenges – aging bridges that weren't designed for today's modern equipment. While no two state programs are exactly the same, there are lessons that can be learned about setting up matching programs, allowing bridge replacements to be bundled based on type or geography, and incentivizing bridge removals. Mark also explained that LB960 language would establish a three-year pilot program to explore innovative ways to address Nebraska's county bridge challenges.

Task Force weighs in. Task Force members support the idea of a state-funded program to help counties address local bridges and emphasized the need for that program to be simple, straightforward and focused on practical designs. Most Task Force members encouraged NDOR to serve in the role of facilitator or advisor, and some see an opportunity for NDOR to champion innovation by using state resources for limited research or standardizing innovative practices. In terms of convening a working group to develop an innovative local bridge program, members suggested tapping consulting engineers, law enforcement, emergency services, and NDOR district engineers, in addition to representatives from counties. Recognizing that the legislation calls for

a three-year pilot program, members encouraged any working group to move as quickly as possible and underscored that permanently removing bridges is strictly a local decision.

Task Force applauds outreach for project prioritization; urges continued outreach

NDOR analyzing significant amount of feedback on prioritization and suggested candidate projects. NDOR Engineer, Brandie Neemann noted there's strong support for expanding the prioritization process for capital improvement projects based on feedback from the recent BNA outreach efforts, with 92 percent of those submitting comments at the regional meetings or via the website supporting or strongly supporting the inclusion of economic performance. Likewise, 93 percent support or strongly support increasing stakeholder input. To date, the website has received more than 2,400 hits and more than 425 surveys and comment cards have been received. The NDOR team is currently working to refine the economic model based on public input and is running a set of example projects to better understand the model results. Because the number of candidate projects more than doubled based on input, Director Schneweis explained that NDOR staff are also focused on a preliminary analysis of candidate projects to identify which projects will go forward for a more comprehensive evaluation.

Task Force members applaud NDOR's efforts and recommend ongoing communication. The Task Force offered a series of practical suggestions for successfully engaging the public and stakeholders going forward. They reminded NDOR that nothing can replace face-to-face meetings and that it is important to continue their meetings in the western part of the state. They also discussed whether NDOR should release a draft list of projects prior to final selection. Members recommended continuing to post information and updates regarding the BNA prioritization progress on the website and committed to letting NDOR know when they hear concerns or questions from the public that need to be addressed broadly. Some members pointed out the importance of being results-oriented and not letting the project evaluation process drag out too long. One member suggested that during the candidate evaluation, some larger projects may address the needs of many smaller projects and thus regional impacts should be considered carefully. Another member summed it up well, "... the economic component is something we need to take a hard look at and weigh correctly. This is a great start."

“ My group was happy to be involved and asked the questions. They walked away knowing that not every priority would be funded, but the fact that someone asked what was important to them was good. You did a lot of listening and that was important.

-Innovation Task Force Member

Wrap-up and ongoing advice sought

Director Schneweis sought and gained approval from the Task Force to become an FHWA designated State Transportation Innovation Council, which means some implementation efforts of the group may be eligible for federal grant funds. He noted that no restrictions or changes in the Task Force charter result from this designation. He also asked if the Task Force would be willing to adjust the meeting schedule so that they could provide additional discussion and input regarding the economic analysis and project prioritization process. The Task Force was quick to agree to continue their advisory role on that issue. Lastly, he thanked the Task Force for their service and noted that Governor Ricketts is quite pleased with the energy and commitment the Task Force is investing in their role to challenge NDOR to modernize its business practices.

Information about the Innovation Task Force and materials presented at the second meeting are available at:

<http://roads.nebraska.gov/innovation-task-force>.