Self-Help
Counties Coalition

State Local Transportation Partnership Proposal

Self-Help Counties Coalition

Alameda County Transportation Commission

Contra Costa County Transportation Authority

Fresno County Transportation Authority

Imperial County Transportation Commission

Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority

Madera County Transportation Authority

Marin County Transportation Authority

Orange County Transportation Authority

Riverside County Transportation Commission

Sacramento County Transportation Authority

Sonoma County Transportation Authority

San Bernardino County Associated Governments

San Diego County Association of Governments

San Francisco County Transportation Authority

San Joaquin County Council of Governments

San Mateo County Transportation Authority

Santa Barbara County Association of Governments

Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority

Tulare County Association of Governments

CALTRANS AND THE SELF HELP COUNTIES COALITION
INTRODUCTION

This document highlights the opportunities, in the view of the Self Help Counties Coalition (SHCC), for Caltrans and the SHCC to jointly promote sustainable, functional, and safe transportation in the State of California. As we Californians continue to navigate an unclear economic future, we hope that Caltrans and the SHCC can work together to incentivize a joint mission of project delivery while ensuring the core responsibilities that Caltrans holds close, are preserved.

This effort requires patience, joint sacrifices, and strong communication such that there is an appropriate alignment of responsibilities and accountability. As budgets at the state and federal level are tightened, SHCC members control much of the scarce transportation funding to be invested in projects up and down the state. The ongoing relationship between Caltrans and SHCC is one that must be constructive and recognize the skills and talents of one another.

By refocusing efforts, identifying core functions, and identifying barriers to success, Caltrans has an opportunity to redefine their vision. The SHCC CEOs believe that this redefinition should be made in coordination with the SHCC and district staff so roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, processes and policies are understood, and employees understand from the top down, what the priorities of the organization are. It is important that Caltrans process and procedures are aligned with roles, responsibilities, and risk. These processes should contribute to solving transportation problems, maintaining current facilities, reducing congestion, and creating jobs.

ONE COMMON GOAL

It is our belief that SHCC shares the common goal with Caltrans to deliver projects timely with effective and efficient use of resources. This goal is particularly salient in the current economic environment.

CHALLENGES

SHCC members have been working in unison with Caltrans for many years to advance important transportation initiatives[1]. Together we have constructed multi-billion-dollar improvement projects statewide. As the primary funding sources for state highway improvements have shifted to the regional agencies, we observe that there are three major challenges to meeting our common goal:

- Responsiveness
- Accountability
- Alignment of Risk and Responsibilities

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[1] It is our understanding that Caltrans has already initiated a self-improvement process in many areas highlighted in this document. We hope that these steps will be broadly communicated with the SHCC and that our input will be sought before the implementation of changes.

RESPONSIVENESS

It is important to note that the local sales tax measures for state-highway related projects are normally accompanied with voter mandates for defined project goals and timely delivery. It is important for Caltrans to be more responsive than ever to the needs of its regional partners for projects that require Caltrans approval so that projects can be delivered as promised. This is critical in maintaining public trust and continuous future funding streams.

Caltrans' existing policies, processes, and procedures (PP&P) were developed when the primary funding sources were from the federal and state level, and the design-bid-build process was the primary delivery methodology. We believe that the PP&P need to be re-examined to be more responsive to the regional needs in the current environment and to the modern alternative delivery tools such as design-build (DB) and public-private-partnership (P3).

Historically, many high-impact schedule delays often involved district reviews with approvals at Caltrans Headquarters in Sacramento. Prime examples include Caltrans' practices on National Environmental Policy Act, delegation and approval for exceptions from the mandatory design standards, longitudinal encroachment permit policy, and approval of construction contract plans, specifications, and estimates (PS&Es). We recommend that fundamental changes to the PP&Ps be considered to allow more decisions be made by the local districts and/or regional transportation agencies. Caltrans should consider best management practices or business models adopted by other state DOTs particularly in the area of streamlining design exception approval processes. Additionally, some of the delays are directly attributable to varying staff experiences. Caltrans should provide better training to to ensure consistency in reviews and push decisions down to the local level as much as possible to minimize turn-around time and avoid unintended scope creep that could result in undesirable cost increases. We also recommend that the localized decision-making structure be accompanied with an appeal process as a stop-gap in case there is a dispute.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The local sales tax measures typically mandate transparency and accountability to our constituents. It is the core belief of the SHCC that an active effort to focus on accountability could promote efficient turnaround times, empowered employees, and result in cost savings and shorter delivery times.

We suggest that accountability starts with restructuring the Department in HQ and districts to address current and future funding reality. The funding cliff has already arrived. For SHCC to continue to retain Caltrans to develop projects on a reimbursable basis, Caltrans must revamp its processes throughout the project development lifecycle to improve internal efficiencies and be more cost effective. We recommend that Caltrans bench mark goals to progressively reduce project development costs over time as well as including SHCC funded projects on the District Directors' Delivery Contract.

Additionally, essential to accountability is accurate cost reporting. If self-help counties are to continue sharing work with Caltrans, Caltrans must provide reliable and timely cost accounting in return.

ALIGNMENT OF RISK AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Agency roles, responsibilities and decision-making should be aligned with risks. Caltrans as the owner-operator of state highway facilities should retain the core responsibilities and manage the risks associated with operations and maintenance activities. On the other hand, for projects with regional agencies as the primary funding sources, the regional agencies bear the primary financial risks. As such, the regional agencies should have the authority and responsibility to

manage and control the process that will have the greatest impact on such risks. Under this premise, we have the following specific recommendation:

1. Work in partnership with SHCC to reassess Caltrans' role in planning; eliminate duplications with MPOs and RTPAs, and enhance evolution of a multi-modal transportation vision (as opposed to highway-centric);
2. Involve SHCC & RTPAs in the implementation of the 2012 Program Review;
3. Support SHCC agencies to coordinate a county-level pilot program to implement process/procedure improvements identified in the 2012 Program Review (VTA is proposing to do this in Santa Clara County);
4. Partner with SHCC and appropriate federal agencies to develop streamlined procedures and/or revise laws, rules and requirements to allow for more streamlining (e.g., adopt AASHTO green book as design guidance standard in place of Caltrans HDM similar to what happened with MUTCD replacing Caltrans Traffic Manual, and to the WSDOT model, and partner MAP 21 program implementation);
5. Consider changes to eliminate policy of Caltrans as California Environmental Quality Act lead agency on all on system projects if less than 50% state funded project;
6. Consider legislative changes to eliminate mandated use of Caltrans right of way (R/W) process when local agency responsible for R/W efforts including Resolution of Necessity of decisions;
7. Work in partnership with SHCC and use Risk Management to determine appropriate level of oversight and control on local agency project;
8. Work in partnership with SHCC to eliminate duplicative processes intended to minimize Department risk: e.g. Office Engineer (OE), Local Assistance, District and HQ reviews; and
9. Involve and partner with SHCC members to a much greater extent in developing the SHOPP;
10. Work to legislatively incorporate alternative delivery methods as permanent tools available to the SHCC members.

We also suggest building in flexibility in implementation to address urban/rural needs. The SHCC also encourages Caltrans to recognize the vast differences in needs between self-help counties (in urban areas) and planning agencies that do not have tax revenues supporting their budgets. This distinction, though a challenge, enables Caltrans to operate in an oversight capacity in some areas, while having broader responsibilities in others.

CONCLUSION

It is our hope that through partnership we can work to enhance the public transportation system by delivering projects that increase mobility, improve safety, and increase quality of life. Our communities deserve roadways where the pavement and bridges are safe and in good shape with roadsides free of graffiti, litter and dead and dying plants and weeds. This effort will take hard work, a willingness to change, and an approach that is more collaborative and positive. The current system should evolve to reflect current financial and accountability realities.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide input on the future of transportation in California. Though change must begin at the top, we believe it vital that district level staff that see the challenges of the organization from the ground up, be included in any action taken by Caltrans in the development of an implementation strategy. We look forward to building this constructive relationship for decades to come and as such, propose that a small group from the SHCC meet with Department executives to jointly develop consensus on these issues and discuss an implementation plan.