

2012 Georgia Engineers Transportation Summit

November 29, 2012

ACEC gets a lot of things right, and the 2012 Transportation Summit conference is an example. A sold out function on November 29th at AmericasMart in downtown, over 400 professionals were provided a full day of insightful information about the transportation opportunities and challenges on the local, statewide, and federal levels.

ARC Executive Director Doug Hooker delivered the opening remarks. He framed his comments in the context of the progress the region continues to make in transportation, as well as other elements impacting the Atlanta metropolitan area: population growth, water and sewer; air quality, aging population, etc. A primary ARC goal through the transportation planning process is to achieve mobility, safety, and capacity across all modes. Funding remains a significant concern and Mr. Hooker verbalized the disappointment over the failed TIA vote. However, for Mr. Hooker the silver lining is that the region worked collaboratively across political boundaries. The new normal/new economy is regional. Regions make up 35% of the land area but provide 65% of the economic activity. Mr. Hooker summarized his closing remarks with the guiding principle of innovate locally and export globally.

Presenting advancements being made statewide, Toby Carr the recently appointed Director of Planning shared information on Georgia DOT initiatives. Although primarily focusing on highway programs, Mr. Carr also touched on progress the State is making with other projects having great economic impacts: the ports of Savannah and Brunswick, Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, and the railroad network. The State is preparing strategies to maximize the funding from the recent transportation bill: Moving Ahead to Progress (MAP-21). While also lamenting the outcome of the TIA vote, Mr. Carr shared his excitement for the three regions that did pass the sales tax and GDOT's efforts to successfully implement the projects within those regions.

The difficulty of shrinking financial resources and escalating costs affects all levels of government. Decreasing vehicle miles traveled, more fuel-efficient vehicles, and lack of a fuel tax increases are primary reasons for a shortfall in the Highway Trust Fund. Although a six-year federal transportation bill would have been

preferable, MAP-21 does experience a moderate funding increases over the next two years. Matt Reiffer, the national ACEC Transportation Director, spoke of the transportation industry's three-year lobbying effort of Congress to arrive at MAP-21. Their work has helped prepare for the next reauthorization bill. Although Mr. Reiffer's comment that "The future is bleak" generated some moaning from the audience, he was upbeat about the continuing efforts to educate lawmakers about how critical the nations' infrastructure is, particularly transportation, and that these investments are essential for the nation's economic growth. Another important effort Mr. Reiffer shared was the transportation organizations' continuing efforts to assist in developing a long-term revenue solution for the Highway Trust Fund.

Polling is an inexact science. The victory of the TIA vote was never assured, but the large margin of the "no" vote in the Atlanta Region referendum was not expected. Understanding the viewpoints and perspectives of the general public aids in developing policies that will generate support for their implementation. Pete Rahn of HNTB, who holds the distinction of having been the head of two different DOTs, shared the results of his firm's national polling effort regarding transportation. Although results from a number of questions were presented (to name a few: state of the existing infrastructure; reasons to support implementing tolls; and who should be trusted in making transportation investment decisions), one of the primary perspectives is that a majority of Americans don't believe what is currently being proposed will actually solve the nation's transportation problems. Mr. Rahn urged the audience to put significant efforts into finding real long-term solutions that also pass the test of urgency.

Continuing the format established a few years ago, the luncheon speaker, Russell McMurry, the recently appointed GDOT Chief Engineer gave his remarks and then presented the GPTQ Preconstruction Awards (the top project being the diverging diamond interchange at I-285 and Ashford Dunwoody Road designed by Moreland-Altobelli). Mr. McMurry's speech centered on the number of innovative projects GDOT has undertaken. The list includes but is not limited to:

- Shoulder use on GA 400
- Variable speed limits on I-285
- Roundabouts (their numbers are increasing)
- Complete Street Policy

He also discussed new ways GDOT is tackling their multi-modal programs, scheduling that is aggressive but reasonable, and environmental streamlining. The recurring theme in McMurry's remarks was that the public must see positive results of these programs for the public to gain confidence in GDOT.

Following lunch, three tracks of concurrent sessions were available that covered detailed information on proposed policy and program changes and the status of current projects. Depending on the participants' interest, one could sit in on an update on the Atlanta Streetcar; the Multimodal Passenger Terminal; a summary of the new Section 4(f) policy; Value Engineering trends; and an overview of GDOT's Design-Build activities. The problem I experienced with this year's breakout sessions was picking which ones to attend at the exclusion of others.

Even with the problems of funding and the misperception by the general public of the challenges of delivering added capacity, safety enhancements, and economic development projects, it is a very exciting time to be a transportation professional. This year's Transportation Summit provided the opportunity to hear from front line folks at all levels, interact with peers, and provided motivation to continue our good work: transportation network that deliver mobility, safety, and capacity for our region to compete on a global level while satisfying local transportation demands.