

Tallahassee-Leon County Corridor Management Program

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ABSTRACT

In the Fall of 2000, the residents of Tallahassee-Leon County passed an extension of the one-cent sales tax for transportation improvements. In May of 2002, the Blueprint 2000 Intergovernmental Agency, set up to oversee the projects, initiated a separate project to develop a comprehensive corridor management program for the City of Tallahassee and Leon County. One goal of the project was to preserve right-of-way for future transportation projects as development occurs (corridor preservation). Another goal was to strengthen local policies and regulations for managing access on the community's major transportation routes (access management). In this way, both communities could advance the Blueprint mission of more effective infrastructure management and in turn help make the most of public sales tax revenues.

The Center for Urban Transportation Research at the University of South Florida was retained to prepare comprehensive plan amendments, ordinances, and design standards to accomplish these goals. The project involved a comprehensive set of policies, standards, and procedures for local corridor management. It also involved numerous jurisdictions, agencies, and stakeholders. This paper provides an overview of the project, highlights of the proposed policies, and issues faced in program development.

INTRODUCTION

The City of Tallahassee and Leon County have a long history of coordination in planning. A joint City/County Planning Department has been in place since 1968, and the jointly adopted local comprehensive plan sets policy directions for both communities. The two jurisdictions coordinate on regional transportation planning through the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) and the Blueprint 2000 Intergovernmental Agency (IA). The Blueprint IA complements the MPO and is governed by the Board of County Commissioners and the City Commission, who oversee projects identified through a citizen-initiated visioning process called “Blueprint 2000”.

The goal of “Blueprint 2000” was to develop a coordinated plan for more effective management of infrastructure and natural resources in the region. The effort culminated in the *Blueprint 2000 and Beyond Project Definitions Report*, which included transportation, conservation, and stormwater management projects. This report was instrumental in obtaining citizen support for an extension of the one-cent sales tax in the Fall of 2000. Eighty percent of these revenues are dedicated to Blueprint projects, with the remaining 20% split equally between the City and County for other high priority sales tax eligible projects.

In May of 2002, the Blueprint 2000 Intergovernmental Agency initiated a project to develop a comprehensive corridor management program for the City of Tallahassee and Leon County. One goal of the project was to preserve right-of-way for future transportation projects as development occurs (corridor preservation). Another goal was to strengthen local policies and regulations for managing access on the community’s major transportation routes (access management). In this way, both communities could advance the Blueprint mission of more effective infrastructure management and in turn help make the most of public sales tax revenues.

The Center for Urban Transportation Research at the University of South Florida was retained to prepare comprehensive plan amendments, ordinances, and design standards to accomplish these goals. The project involved a comprehensive set of policies, standards, and procedures for local corridor management. It also involved numerous jurisdictions, agencies, and stakeholders. This paper provides an overview of the project, highlights of the proposed policies, and issues faced in program development.

Corridor Preservation Issues and Recommendations

Neither jurisdiction was entirely new to corridor preservation – both had policies and regulations addressing corridor preservation. However, the local policy structure had certain issues that had to be addressed. For example, both communities had centerline setback ordinances for right-of-way preservation, but the setbacks had proven inadequate. In one case, a Home Depot parking lot had encroached into the path of a road widening project at a cost of about \$500,000 for right-of-way acquisition at that site alone.

Also, the centerline setbacks applied only to projects in the 5-year MPO Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). This left many planned future corridors unprotected for long periods and thereby increased the potential for development encroachment. It was important to the community, for legal and practical reasons, to apply corridor preservation measures only to the most viable transportation projects. Yet the 5 year TIP had proven overly limiting. It made sense, therefore, to extend corridor preservation measures to all projects in the MPO Cost Feasible Plan, given that it is financially constrained

and represents the region's transportation improvement priorities. Changes to these priorities could always be addressed through future amendments to the local comprehensive plan.

Another, more controversial, issue was a general lack of agreement regarding the amount of right-of-way that should be preserved for future corridors. A cross section had been recommended by Blueprint for the widening of Capital Circle, the community's primary beltway, but neither community had adopted typical cross sections that could be applied to other projects in the long range plan. To address this issue, generalized widths were identified based on a few typical cross sections and compared against right-of-way widths used by other Florida local governments for corridor preservation.

City and County engineers evaluated the proposed widths based on local experience and increased them to allow flexibility to accommodate variations in terrain, drainage, and design. Specific issues considered in establishing the corridor widths included:

- Allowance for variations in road location, based on existing development and natural or cultural resources the community may wish to preserve,
- Accommodation of drainage needs and topographical changes,
- Accommodation of operational features such as turn lanes at intersections and transit turnouts, and
- Flexibility in road design, such as allowing for wider medians, bicycle lanes, utility strips, sidewalks of varying widths, and buffer strips between the sidewalk and the curb of the road.

The generalized ROW widths were intended to provide interim protection from development encroachment until a specific alignment and cross section could be determined through project development studies. Alignments had been determined for about half of the projects designated for future widening and these alignments would apply for the purposes of development review - not the generalized widths. These alignments had generally been within 20-40 feet of the generalized widths. The implementing ordinance assumed the existing centerline would be the future centerline, "except where an alternative centerline alignment would be clearly less harmful to the environment, would displace fewer residents and businesses, or is more technically or financially feasible." For new roads the local government would have to establish an approximate alignment.

Given the generalized nature of the future corridors, it was important to provide some flexibility in the administrative process. A policy was added to the comprehensive plan amendments allowing for modification of the alignment in designated areas pursuant to a sector plan, alignment study or typical cross section, or for other specific community planning objectives. A greater variety of regulatory tools and mitigation options was also needed to preserve property rights and avoid the potential for regulatory takings, while still preserving needed right-of-way. Recommended tools and options included:

1. A basic restriction on building in the right-of-way of a planned transportation facility without a variance;
2. An option for clustering developments by reducing setbacks or other site design requirements to avoid encroachment into the right-of-way;
3. Allowance for some interim use of transportation right-of-way for uses having low structural impact through an agreement that requires the property owner to relocate or discontinue the use at their expense when the land is ultimately needed for the transportation facility;

4. Allowance for on-site density transfer from the preserved right-of-way to the remainder of the parcel.

The review procedure in the proposed implementing ordinance included a mandatory preapplication conference for those proposing to subdivide or develop land in or adjacent to a designated corridor. The application would need to include a statement of how the proposed project had been designed to mitigate, as much as possible, its impact on the future corridor, as well as any requests for a variance or for mitigation of the impact of the corridor on the development. Staff were directed to consider the relationship of the proposed project to the future corridor and produce a written report for consideration by the City or County Development Review Committee.

The staff report was to include all supporting findings and conclusions on the consistency of the project with the future corridor, any anticipated impacts, and recommendations. Staff could recommend one or more of the following:

- Approval of the development as proposed, with or without conditions;
- Denial of the development as proposed;
- Modification of the corridor alignment and approval of the development, with or without conditions;
- Modification of the proposed development and the issuance of a development permit for the development as modified, with or without conditions;
- Mitigation of the impact of the transportation corridor on the proposed development as provided in this ordinance, through the transfer of development rights, clustering of structures, reduced setbacks, interim use of the corridor, or other means acceptable to the local government and the applicant.
- Acquisition of all or part of the reserved land or an option to purchase the reserved land by the governmental unit responsible for improving the corridor or another appropriate governmental unit as designated in the report, pursuant to approval of the appropriate authority of the affected governmental unit.

To address advance acquisition, a planning objective was added directing the City and County to: “Explore land banking policies, procedures and funding options to facilitate early acquisition of right-of-way for designated future transportation corridors.” This objective complemented efforts of the Blueprint Intergovernmental Agency staff to establish a land banking policy for advance acquisition. A review of contemporary land banking programs was conducted by CUTR to provide staff with insight into important elements to consider for the land banking policy. Although land banking has typically been used for housing or environmental purposes, it holds great promise as a method for minimizing disruption to properties and to contain right-of-way costs. CUTR had conducted a review of contemporary land banking programs to

In the end, local officials were not comfortable applying the generalized ROW widths for systemwide corridor preservation. A key concern was the potential for preservation efforts to preclude the ability to accomplish an urban context, with buildings abutting the sidewalk. Efforts to address this concern through various policy and administrative measures, until more specific alignments and design objectives could be determined, were not successful. The relative complexity of the proposed measures and the limited opportunities for discussion in public workshops added to the difficulty of achieving consensus on this issue.

Other issues were at play as well, including a proposed mandatory fair-share dedication requirement that some saw as tantamount to an impact fee. Both communities had enacted transportation impact fees in the early 1990s, but these were later rescinded. Given this history and the apparent ongoing concern, the fair share analysis was removed from the proposed regulations and the plan policy was changed from “shall” to “may”, so dedications could still be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Ultimately, the final decision was to apply the corridor preservation provisions only to the Capital Circle corridor, the region’s main artery that had an adopted cross section and that was a key element of the Blueprint plan. Rather than reframing the policies and regulations to apply only to Capital Circle, the comprehensive structure of the plan and regulations was retained so elected officials could still apply it to other corridors in the future through the comprehensive plan amendment process. Each community was also encouraged to proceed with adoption of typical cross sections and street design standards, as well as additional corridor-specific policies.

Access Management Issues and Recommendations

As with corridor preservation, access management was not new to Tallahassee or Leon County. Both communities had local access management policies in the comprehensive plan and nearly identical access management regulations and driveway manuals. Both regularly interfaced with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) regarding access permitting on the state highway system. And in spite of a few occasional problems, everybody seemed to be coordinating quite well.

Yet the local access management requirements were generally outdated, rather limited, and somewhat inconsistent with those of FDOT. The approach to regulating access in the City and County reflected the pre-1988 access management requirements of FDOT. With the adoption by FDOT of a comprehensive access management program in 1988 and significant advances in access management practices nationally, it was time for both local governments to update their requirements. Some of the design standards and regulations governing access connections, auxiliary lanes, medians and signals also needed to be updated and expanded.

We recommended that each community consolidate access management regulations and procedures into a unified ordinance and refine existing public works standards accordingly. The City of Tallahassee was already in the process of developing new public works design standards that included a chapter on access management, when the project began. These draft standards were consistent with the state of the practice, but some of the provisions needed to be refined or expanded and others were more appropriate for inclusion in the code of regulations. Therefore, we focused our efforts on refining the draft City access design standards. Given the history of coordination, it was anticipated that the County would adapt the City public works design standards for their use as well. These standards could then replace the outdated “Driveway and Street Connection Regulations Policies and Procedures” in both the City and County.

Inconsistencies between state and local standards also raised the potential for coordination problems during connection permitting activities of the City, County, and FDOT. A draft access management ordinance was prepared to supersede the outdated standards in the code and driveway manuals and expanded on the access issues that would be regulated. The proposed ordinance called for adoption of FDOT access management standards by reference for the state highway system and both local governments were encouraged to apply FDOT

standards during development review and sector planning on state highways. Finally, a draft agreement for state/local coordination in access permitting was prepared for future consideration by each local government and FDOT.

On an administrative level, neither community had adequate procedures and criteria to handle requests for deviations from access spacing standards. The proposed ordinance empowered administrative staff to decide on minor deviations, and to establish a more rigorous committee review and appeals process for major deviations. This approach streamlined variance approval for minor deviations and provided for more consistent administration and enforcement in response to requests for major deviations. It was also consistent with FDOT practices.

Another administrative issue was that neither the City nor the County had mandatory TIA requirements. Traffic impact assessments (TIA), which provide information critical for evaluating access location and design during development review, were required only on a case-by-case basis and generally only for larger or more controversial projects. Our recommendation was to establish a tiered TIA requirement with different levels of analysis for different size developments, and a pre-application process for larger or more complex developments.

Although small developments (e.g. fewer than 100 trips per hour) are typically exempted from TIAs, a site access and circulation review can still be conducted to ensure that access connections are safely located. For other developments, typically those that generate 100 trips or more in the peak hour, some type of traffic impact study is generally required as part of the access permit review application. The larger the development the more comprehensive the TIA that is needed to evaluate potential impacts. The draft City Public Works Design Standards were consistent with these recommendations and therefore became the basis for our recommendation to the County as well.

Another issue, raised by County staff, was the practice of allowing up to ten lots to be created outside of platting requirements (“limited partition subdivision”), provided no new road was proposed. The provision had contributed to the creation of strip lots along major roadways with no alternative access, but could also prove politically difficult to remove. Our recommendation was to incorporate a policy in the comprehensive plan prohibiting the creation of any new lot or parcel along arterial or collector roadways that would result in access that does not comply with connection spacing standards. The proposed code required review of all new lots for conformance with this policy, with an exception for lots having alternative access.

No corridor management program is complete without provisions to promote a supporting street network with adequate connectivity. A balanced, connected network of streets and sidewalks not only makes an area more conducive to alternative modes of transportation, it also increases opportunities for alternative access to development. Therefore, the corridor management program established measures to reinforce the development of street networks with adequate connectivity, including the following policies in the comprehensive plan:

Policy 1.6.9: [T] (*Effective 7/1/04*)

All development plans shall contribute to developing a local and collector street and unified circulation system that will allow multimodal access to and from the proposed development, as well as access to surrounding developments.

Policy 1.6.10: [T] (Effective 7/1/04)

All development plans shall incorporate and continue all sub-arterial streets stubbed to the boundary of the development plan by previously approved development plans or existing development.

The proposed access management ordinance expanded on these policies and provided criteria for exceptions. For example, it called for all development plans to contribute to developing a local and collector street and circulation system that will serve the proposed development, as well as existing and future development, within a one-half mile radius. The local and collector street system was to “allow multi-modal access and multiple routes from each development to existing or planned neighborhood centers, parks and schools, without requiring the use of arterial streets.”

Property owners were given the option of submitting a local street connection study that demonstrates how the proposed street and circulation system meets this intent and how undeveloped or partially developed properties within a one-half radius can be adequately served by alternative street layouts. Potential exceptions to the street network and connectivity regulations included physical conditions (e.g. buildings, significant natural or cultural resources, etc.) that preclude development of the connecting street, considering the potential for future redevelopment.

CONCLUSION

The corridor management policies were adopted into the Tallahassee-Leon County Comprehensive Plan on July 1, 2004. Although the corridor preservation policies and measures will be applied to one key corridor at this stage, the framework is now in place to designate other corridors for preservation through future comprehensive plan amendments. The access management policies that were adopted provided a strong policy basis for a range of access management actions. Each community has subsequently begun the process for adoption of the proposed ordinances.

The corridor management program will benefit Tallahassee and Leon County in a variety of ways. By preserving land needed for future transportation improvements, the corridor preservation measures will contain right-of-way costs and reduce disruption to homes and businesses when the road is ultimately improved. The administrative process and mitigation tools will preserve property rights and accommodate development, without compromising the corridor. The access management provisions will result in safer roads, with less delay, and better designed access and circulation systems. And measures to improve connectivity of supporting streets and site circulation systems will accommodate development on key corridors while reducing the need for direct arterial access.

Clearly, it is in the community’s economic interest that the road projects proceed in a cost effective manner, and that every effort is made to manage development to preserve the safety, efficiency and character of those corridors. It is in the property owner’s interest for transportation projects to proceed as they will enhance the development potential and value of abutting property. Developers will benefit from the flexibility and mitigation tools of the corridor management program, and greater ability to plan projects that are compatible with the future transportation facility. By adopting the corridor management program, the Tallahassee and Leon County Commissions have established a framework for public and private

cooperation in corridor management which can serve as a model for other areas hoping to accomplish these important corridor management objective.