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DOT planning responds to demand for transparency
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Determining future road projects is a process now under construction after an order from Gov. Bev Perdue demanded more transparency throughout the Department of Transportation's (DOT) planning procedures.

Members of the state came to the table with the sixcounty Rural Planning Organization (RPO), which includes Macon County, on Thursday, June 26, to outline its new process for road building prioritization.

In that effort to be more transparent and remove politics from the playing field, the DOT has developed a complex formula-based method to determine road work priority. The state is adding quantitative and qualitative measures to a weighted decision-making process giving more leverage to regions in determining project priority.

"In the past, there wasn't any ranking. The county contributed its preference through the RPO and then the division made recommendations," said Joel Setzer, DOT division engineer. The process has changed slightly. While preference still moves through the levels of county, RPO, division and state, those preferences have weighted value.

Because the ranking is based on a formula, Setzer said there may be some divisions that try and work the formulas to their advantage. "My approach is to rank them where we see need and then let it fall out the way it will," he said.

Wednesday's meeting was designed to set up a methodology within this RPO for creating that prioritization. Ryan Sherby, who directs the RPO and facilitated Thursday's meeting, explained that it was important to have a defined process which would rank the top 25 projects of the six counties in a fair manner.

The group, which included representatives from Macon, Jackson and Cherokee counties in attendance, decided that it, too, would follow a weighted formula for prioritization.

“It’s good to give weight to county priorities ... that way each of your number one projects has some weight to it,” Sherby said. “But with that methodology, we have a six-way tie for the top project.

The group decided that being a part of an existing transportation plan, regional impact and average daily traffic will be the remaining factors to help in determining a project’s priority.

“To be honest, I think attach it to an existing plan. I know we don’t have one, but that’s what makes sense,” said David Badger, Cherokee county manager. Group members agreed that a road on an existing plan had already been studied and had a better chance for demonstrating need for the project.

Right now, only Jackson County has a completed Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) and Macon County is just starting its own process for developing a similar plan.

“In my opinion there ought not be a project on the TIP (Transportation Improvement Plan) that’s not on a CTP. So, I’m hoping this encourages other counties to look at that [program],” Setzer said.

For counties that do not have a CTP, other transportation plans, like the older thoroughfare plans are applicable.

Regional impact is harder to determine for this specific RPO. The isolated nature of the counties creates fewer options for regional impact. “The mountains still make us isolated in our communities. It’s a factor of the lay of the land; we don’t have a lot of roads interconnecting us as regional projects,” Setzer said.

Counties will look at roads that affect more than one county both interstate and intra state as the borders of Tennessee, Georgia and South Carolina could create high priority for a road bringing in travelers and tourists. Corridor K, running through Graham and Cherokee counties, was one such project readily identifiable to the group.

With a ranking system in place, Sherby said he will take the existing projects counties have previously identified and apply to scales to them. In one formula, he will apply an 80 percent, 10 percent, five percent, five percent weight to county priority, plan reference, regional impact and average daily traffic respectively. In a second run, he will weight the projects in a 85-5-5-5 percentage based formula.

The RPO must have a draft of its projects by September, but Setzer cautioned that the timeline should be moved up.

“If people have heartburn about it, you want to find out now. I hear you saying that you have some time, but I am a little leery as this is our first time doing this. I’d like to see something at the RPO level sooner,” he said.

Sherby said he will run the numbers on existing projects within the next several weeks and should have a first draft available for county review in August. In the meantime, counties were asked to review their own road planning priorities to ensure that no new projects had developed since road plans were last reviewed in December.