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WASHTENAW AREA TRANSPORTATION STUDY

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Resolution of Support for Exploring an Ann Arbor MPO

- Whereas,** the Washtenaw Area Transportation Study (WATS) is a transportation planning agency responsible for the planning and allocation of federal funds for transportation in the Ann Arbor Urbanized Area primarily in Washtenaw County and with membership from seventeen of the twenty-eight units of government, two universities, and two transportation agencies; and
- Whereas,** WATS has had separate staff since the 1970's and received designated funding and been eligible to be a separate metropolitan planning organization (MPO) since 1980; and
- Whereas,** WATS is a transportation management area (TMA) for the federal transportation planning process and is required to fulfill the same requirements as an MPO; and
- Whereas,** being a separate MPO will eliminate the duplicate transportation planning process and reduce the approval period for the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) from five to two months and reduce the Long Range Plan from seven to four months; and
- Whereas,** WATS Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) will be prepared and approved in less time; and
- Whereas,** WATS planning funding reimbursement time will be reduced from 6-9 months to two months; and
- Whereas,** WATS becoming a separate MPO will save both WATS and SEMCOG staff time that is currently spent coordinating the duplicate process as WATS improvements account for 20 percent of the SEMCOG TIP and 30 percent of the SEMCOG long range plan; and
- Whereas,** WATS will be able to incorporate all bridge, safety, CMAQ, enhancement and transit projects into its long range plan; and
- Whereas,** WATS will be able to incorporate enhancement funded projects into the TIP as soon as the conditional approval is provided by MDOT; and

POLICY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- CITY OF ANN ARBOR • ANN ARBOR TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY • ANN ARBOR TOWNSHIP • CITY OF CHELSEA • VILLAGE OF DEXTER • DEXTER TOWNSHIP • EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY • MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION • CITY OF MILAN • NORTHFIELD TOWNSHIP • PITTSFIELD TOWNSHIP • CITY OF SALINE • SCIO TOWNSHIP • SOUTHWEST WASHTENAW COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS • SUPERIOR TOWNSHIP • UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN • WASHTENAW COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS • WASHTENAW COUNTY ROAD COMMISSION • CITY OF YPSILANTI • YPSILANTI TOWNSHIP • EX OFFICIO: FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION • SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS •

**AN INTERMUNICIPALITY COMMITTEE ORGANIZED UNDER ACT 200 OF PUBLIC ACTS OF MICHIGAN (1957)
REPRESENTING WASHTENAW COUNTY**

Whereas, WATS could align its fiscal year with the State and Federal fiscal year to eliminate the need to carry additional funding for the three month period from July 1 to October 1; and

Whereas, WATS already maintains a travel model that allows it to complete the necessary analysis for the development of the long range plan and air quality analysis if necessary; and

Now therefore be it resolved, the Washtenaw Area Transportation Study Policy Committee supports the forming of an MPO exploration committee and directs staff to support the committee as it would have value to WATS and its members.

Adopted on June 15, 2011

Jim Carson, Councilperson, Dexter Village
Chair, Washtenaw Area Transportation
Study Policy Committee

June 9, 2011

Ms. Terri Blackmore
Executive Director
Washtenaw Area Transportation Study
705 N. Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48103-1560

Dear Ms. Blackmore and Members of the WATS Policy Committee,

We want to thank you for the opportunity to comment as you evaluate the pros and cons of seeking Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) status for Washtenaw Area Transportation Study (WATS) separate from the overall MPO umbrella of SEMCOG. Rather than add to the list of pros and cons you are reviewing, we would like to respond to several questions germane to your decision making.

Would WATS securing a change in MPO status improve Washtenaw County's ability to get transportation projects funded?

This is obviously a fundamental question. It would have little impact on routine funding of projects under formula grants. Washtenaw County would lose, however, the ability to receive "surplus" formula funding that the other six counties were unable to spend. This is significant as last year two projects received such funding, \$488,000 in stimulus money for Washtenaw County Road Commission projects on Wagner, Huron River Drive, and North Territorial and \$28,000 in rural surface transportation funds for North Territorial.

It could very likely negatively impact funding for projects under Congestion Mitigation/Air Quality (CMAQ) and Safety programs. SEMCOG's practice of prioritizing projects submitted to the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) has been to spread funding across all seven counties, ensuring that each county has access to funds under these two programs. WATS has consistently received more CMAQ and Safety funds as a result of being part of the SEMCOG MPO than it would as a separate MPO.

Would WATS securing a change in MPO status improve MDOT's processing of projects in the long range transportation plan and the transportation improvement program?

The long range transportation plan and transportation improvement program amendments rarely take six to seven months to process as has been stated. The suggestion that dealing directly with MDOT staff would lead to a significantly streamlined and shorter timeframe is very optimistic. MDOT staffing levels have been reduced by more than twenty percent. Their turnaround will be longer, not shorter, and will not be streamlined by adding another organization directly submitting projects.

We pledge to continue to work with you to define how individual projects can be bundled in broader funding categories to reduce the need for as many amendments. The nature of the projects that can be bundled allow for projects that do not have regional or even county-wide significance to move forward without amendment.

Can WATS truly be a separate single-county entity?

The answer is no. The U. S. Department of Transportation regulations and those of MDOT emphasize planning and project programming by urbanized areas. The urbanized area in Washtenaw County also includes geography in Wayne County. WATS would have to develop procedures that encompass part of Wayne County and obtain Wayne County's buy-in.

Would the timely flow of planning funds to WATS be improved?

SEMCOG, with very infrequent exceptions, adheres to our commitment to pay WATS within three days of receipt of funding from MDOT. Delays result from processing time required by MDOT, not from SEMCOG. If anything, MDOT's processing of invoices submitted by an additional agency would be longer not shorter in light of their staffing challenges.

What messages would becoming a separate MPO send to the rest of the region?

Beyond the funding questions discussed above, this, we believe, is the fundamental question not just for WATS, but Washtenaw County. Clearly, Washtenaw County is tied from economic and transportation perspectives to the other six counties in our region. Census data shows that twenty-three percent of Washtenaw County resident workers commute outside the county, while thirty-seven percent of the jobs in Washtenaw County are filled by those residing outside the county and commuting in. Further, the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners Chair (recently one of the "fab five" at the Detroit Regional Chamber's Mackinac Policy Conference) and the Ann Arbor SPARK are collaborating in regional economic development. This integrated, cooperative spirit might be viewed as being eroded by a splintering off for transportation purposes.

What approving actions would be required?

At a minimum, general purpose governments in the Washtenaw urbanized area representing seventy-five percent of the population plus the City of Ann Arbor would have to approve the redesignation. Since this also affects the entire seven county urbanized area MPO, a similar action would most likely have to occur for the entire region and the City of Detroit. The Governor would also have to agree. We are unsure how easily this could be accomplished.

We hope that our response to these questions adds additional perspective to your decision making. We would be happy to meet with you to clarify or elaborate on any of these points.

Sincerely,



Paul E. Tait, CAE
Executive Director



Carmine Palombo, PE
Director, Transportation Programs

Cc: Conan Smith, Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners Chair
James Carson, Washtenaw Area Transportation Study Chair