



May 6, 2024

To: Regional Transportation Planning Committee

From: Darrell E. Johnson, Chief Executive Officer

Subject: Regional Planning Update

Overview

Regular updates on regional planning matters are provided to highlight current transportation planning issues impacting the Orange County Transportation Authority and the Southern California region.

Recommendation

Receive and file as an information item.

Background

The Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) regularly coordinates with other planning and regulatory agencies within the Southern California region. This coordination is conducted at many levels, involving the OCTA Board of Directors (Board), executives, and technical staff. Some examples of the regional planning forums in which OCTA participates include:

- Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) Regional Council, policy committees, and technical working groups
- State Route 91 Advisory Committee
- Regional Chief Executive Officers meetings
- South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD) working groups
- Interregional planning coordination meetings (OCTA, SCAG, the San Diego Association of Governments, and the California Department of Transportation districts 7, 11, and 12)

Regional planning updates are prepared twice a year, with the last update to the Board in October 2023. Attachment A includes regional planning activities that are being monitored by staff, including relevant activities highlighted in previous updates.

Since the October 2023 update, planning activities have continued throughout the region, including:

- Advancement on the Southeast Gateway Line project in the City (or County of) Los Angeles
- Rulemaking which will initiate potential for federally imposed highway funding sanctions
- Adoption of the 2024-2050 Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS)

A discussion of each is provided below.

Discussion

Advancement on the Southeast Gateway Line project in Los Angeles County

The Southeast Gateway Line (formerly known as the West Santa Ana Branch Transit Corridor) is a 14.5-mile light rail transit line being planned by the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro). The proposed service is envisioned to connect the Slauson/A Line station to the intersection of Pioneer Boulevard and the Pacific Electric Right-of-Way in the City of Artesia (Attachment B). This would place the terminus of the proposed service less than two miles from the Orange County Line.

In January 2022, the Metro Board of Directors identified the 14.5-mile locally preferred alternative (LPA) and a maintenance and storage facility (MSF) for the Southeast Gateway Line. In addition, the Metro Board of Directors selected Los Angeles Union Station (LAUS) to be the northern terminus and a separate study is currently underway to plan the additional segment connecting the Slauson/A Line Station and LAUS.

The environmental review phase is now underway for the LPA and MSF. Metro is also developing a First/Last Mile (FLM) Plan, which aims to enhance accessibility and connectivity to the new line. The Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report, FLM Plan, and the study findings for the Slauson/A Line Station to LAUS connection are all anticipated to be presented to the Metro BOD in 2024. The groundbreaking is currently anticipated between 2025-2026, with the service expected to open to the public between 2034-2036.

Previously, OCTA supported a less costly project that would extend the Metro C Line 2.8-miles from the eastern terminus in the City of Norwalk (City) to the Norwalk/Santa Fe Springs Metrolink Station. This extension would improve transit connections for Orange County residents traveling to Los Angeles International Airport, the City of Long Beach, and downtown Los Angeles. SCAG initiated a study of this extension in 2016, but it was put on hold at the request

of the City. At the time, this was not a priority for the City, and they had concerns about the potential impacts to their community. While the City has not expressed interest in resuming the study, the project remains in the 2024-2050 RTP/SCS. In addition, the Southeast Gateway Line project will provide more urban redevelopment opportunities compared with the C Line extension, which may be an additional factor in Metro's project prioritization.

Potential for Federally Imposed Highway Funding Sanctions

Highway project development and delivery schedules for OCTA projects are potentially at risk due to ongoing disagreements between the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and air quality agencies in California. EPA published a proposed rule on February 2, 2024, to disapprove a Contingency Measure Plan (CMP) prepared by the AQMD and California Air Resources Board (CARB) for the 1997 ozone National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS). EPA argues that the CMP does not meet the Clean Air Act (CAA) requirements due to "improper" placement of responsibilities on federal agencies. If the CMP disapproval is finalized, sanctions could go into effect if AQMD and CARB cannot resolve the outstanding issues to EPA's satisfaction. Of primary concern to OCTA is the highway funding sanction that would start 24 months after the disapproval is finalized. The highway funding sanction, if enacted, would restrict federal funding and approvals for highway projects beginning in fiscal year 2026-27. This could result in Orange County, and other affected agencies, not receiving expected fair share returns of federal gas tax funding. OCTA is currently working with partner agencies to develop an amenable resolution prior to implementation of sanctions.

Consistent with the CAA, EPA sets NAAQS to protect public health from harmful air pollutants. In 1997, EPA established a standard for ozone, as it is a key contributor to the formation of smog. The South Coast Air Basin (SCAB), which includes parts of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, as well as all of Orange County, is currently classified as an "Extreme" nonattainment area for this standard, with an attainment date of June 15, 2024. This means the SCAB area is one of the worst air basins in the nation for ozone levels.

AQMD and CARB are responsible for developing and implementing a State Implementation Plan (SIP) that will achieve the 1997 ozone NAAQS. A SIP was approved by EPA in 2019. However, the SIP included measures that depend on generally described emerging technologies and strategies. These measures are accepted by EPA, but they must be defined in more detail at least three years prior to the attainment date. Therefore, AQMD and CARB subsequently developed a CMP to better define the generalized measures included in the SIP.

The CMP detailed an approach that was dependent on the EPA, CARB, and AQMD each implementing measures needed to attain the 1997 ozone NAAQS. In late 2019, the CMP was submitted to EPA (formally titled "Final Contingency

Measure Plan—Planning for Attainment of the 1997 80 ppb 8-hour Ozone Standard in the South Coast Air Basin”). EPA was required to approve or disapprove the CMP by July 2021; however, no decision was made. In 2023, the AQMD and three environmental organizations (East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, People’s Collective of Environmental Justice, and Sierra Club) sued EPA in the hopes that EPA would be motivated to approve the CMP and work with CARB and AQMD.

The CMP also emphasized that since the 1997 standard was established, both CARB and AQMD have collectively reduced emissions by 70 percent from regulated sources under their control. Conversely, EPA has only reduced emissions by 15 percent from regulated sources under its control, including aircraft, ships, trains, and out-of-state trucks. The CMP states that the 1997 standard is only achievable if EPA addresses its respective regulated sources since nearly two-thirds of the needed emission reductions fall under federal authority.

In response to the lawsuit, EPA published the proposed rule on February 2, 2024, to disapprove the CMP. A public comment period was initiated when the proposed rule was published. This comment period was scheduled to close on March 4, 2024. However, OCTA, SCAG, and other county transportation commissions submitted a joint comment letter (Attachment C). This successfully extended the comment deadline to April 3, 2024, with a final action by EPA expected by July 1, 2024.

The comment period extension allowed time for further analysis and coordination between OCTA and partner agencies and another joint-agency letter was submitted on April 2, 2024, with formal comments on the proposed rule (Attachment D). The joint comment letter requests that EPA approve the CMP, recognize, and deliver its fair share of emission reductions from federal sources, and pursue meaningful partnerships to achieve acceptable air standards in the region. While there are some indications that EPA may delay the final action, OCTA is continuing to work with partner agencies to find an amenable resolution as soon as possible.

Adoption of the 2024-2050 RTP/SCS

On April 4, 2024, the SCAG Regional Council approved the final 2024-2050 RTP/SCS, which is required every four years. The 2024-2050 RTP/SCS includes OCTA projects and programs that are consistent with the 2022 Long-Range Transportation Plan. In order to meet air quality conformity requirements, the RTP/SCS must include regional strategic investments that go beyond what is included in OCTA’s Long-Range Transportation Plan. One example of this is the incorporation of the Regional Express Lane Network, which proposes to utilize congestion pricing strategies on state highways and interstates to improve Southern California’s mobility. This is consistent with strategies prepared by

Caltrans, which include the ongoing study to implement express lanes on Interstate 5 from Red Hill Avenue to the Los Angeles County Line. Another example is the switch from paying gas taxes by gallons of fuel consumed to miles traveled to account for the transition of the vehicle fleet from internal combustion engines to electric vehicles.

SCAG is now submitting the final documents to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for review and approval. The review consists of a finding by FHWA and FTA that all conformity requirements have been met, including those regarding the acceptability of funding assumptions, emission analyses, and demonstration of timely implementation of transportation control measures. The EPA-related issue discussed above is not anticipated to impact the federal conformity determinations for the 2024-2050 RTP/SCS.

SCAG also submitted the final 2024-2050 RTP/SCS to CARB for technical review of the SCS element. This review focuses on the strategies and assumptions used to demonstrate how the greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction target was met for the SCAG region. The target for the SCAG region is currently set at a 19 percent per capita GHG emission reduction from 2005 levels by 2035. The RTP/SCS outlines various land use, transit, active transportation, and pricing/user fee strategies, amongst others to reduce GHG emissions by 19.8 percent by 2035.

The federal and state agency approvals are anticipated by June 5, 2024. Once the approvals are finalized, the projects and programs included in the 2024-2050 RTP/SCS will meet a key eligibility requirement needed to receive state and federal funding and project development approvals.

Summary

Staff is engaged in ongoing activities regarding planning in Orange County and Southern California. OCTA staff will monitor the progress of the Southeast Gateway Line project and continue to work with partner agencies to avoid federally imposed highway sanctions. As developments of these planning issues progress, staff will review and provide input as needed to protect the interests of OCTA. Staff will continue to keep the Board informed of the status of these ongoing activities.

Attachments

- A. Regional Planning Activities – May 2024
- B. Southeast Gateway Line Map
- C. Letter from Kome Ajise, Executive Director, Southern California Association of Governments, and others, to Ginger Vagenas, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Region IX, dated February 26, 2024, re: Docket ID No. EPA–R09– OAR–2023–0626 Joint Request for a 30-Day Extension of Comment Deadline on EPA Proposed Action to Disapprove South Coast Air Quality Management District Final Contingency Measure State Implementation Plan for the 1997 8-Hour Ozone Standard in the South Coast Air Basin (89 Fed. Reg. 7320)
- D. Letter from Kome Ajise, Executive Director, Southern California Association of Governments, and others, to Ginger Vagenas, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region IX, dated April 2, 2024, re: SCAG Region Comments on U.S. EPA’s Proposed Disapproval of South Coast Contingency Measure State Implementation Plan for the 1997 Federal Ozone Standard [Docket ID No. EPA–R09– OAR–2023–0626]

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