April 2001

From: Vicki Guarino, Rogue Valley Council of Governments

Date: April 23, 2001

Attendees: Tim Alford, Jim Buckley, Jon Deason, Jean Milgram, Michael Montero, Jane Podolski, Wade Six, John Ferris, Mike Mahar. **Absent Members:** Patty Claeys, Jani Hale, Teresa Hogan.

Re: CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE (CAC) MEETING FINAL MINUTES for April 18, 2001

Location: Rogue Federal Credit Union Financial Center, Medford, Or.

Guests: Twenty-three members of the public.

Project Team: Dave Mayfield, URS; Frank Stevens, ODOT; John Morrison, Dan Moore and Vicki Guarino, RVCOG.

1. Introduction
John Morrison convened the meeting at 5:35 p.m. and announced the objectives of the meeting including a review of the process for identifying the preferred alternative, discussion of the implications of the No-Build Alternative, and examining the future role of CAC members. The CAC approved minutes from the Feb. 21, 2001 meeting.

2. Preferred Alternatives Process
Dave Mayfield reviewed the process that has been used to develop and evaluate project alternatives, beginning with identifying the problems at the South Medford Interchange. The main problem was a lack of capacity, but there were safety problems as well, such as the short "weave'' distance for making lane changes to reach Interstate ramps. Out-moded design features were noted, including the existence of a busy road – Barnett – at the interchange, a large number of access points, absence of bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and three failing intersections.

To determine the nature of the traffic, an origin and destination study was done. The study identified a lack of connectivity in Medford, illustrated by the fact that 40 percent of Interstate traffic between the North and South Medford interchanges is local. The Interstate is the only direct route across town.

Alternatives development was kicked off in May, 1999, with a bus tour and design workshop attended by the CAC and the Solution Team. The public was invited to draw out possible new Interstate access designs. Numerous alternatives were produced including a South Stage Road Interchange, and building new connector streets to reduce local traffic on the Interstate. Five alternatives were eliminated almost immediately because they clearly wouldn't solve interchange problems.

Remaining alternatives were put through a transportation analysis process. Alternatives were studied with numerous mix/match variations, so all told there were 45-50 different alternatives modeled. The goal was to find a long-term traffic solution. It had been expected that four or five alternatives would survive modeling analysis, however only three survived initial evaluation. In further study, however, one of the three, the One-Way Couplet using

Boyd Street, was eliminated. The Couplet had a fatal flaw of requiring an unworkable triple left turn. Throughout the process, the No Build Alternative has remained under study. John Ferris asked about north-south connectors, whether any would solve the problem. Mayfield said that some proposed routes probably would be good for Medford and deserve further study as city projects, but none solved the problems at the interchange and some would make interchange traffic worse.

Ferris also asked whether the slight southward shift in the interchange location between the Highland and Ellendale Alternatives would make a difference for the future possible siting of a South Stage Road Interchange. Mayfield said that implementation either of these alternatives would not affect the decision to build a South Stage Road Interchange in the future.

3. Discussion of Project Developments

John Morrison and Jon Deason led the CAC in a general comment period about recent project developments, and brought up recent Mail Tribune editorials and letters that have been critical of the project and the identified preferred alternative.

Jean Milgram wanted to know the meaning of the Solution Team's vote on the preferred alternative, noting the vote was made without input from the CAC. Dave Mayfield said the vote was done as a courtesy to the public, especially landowners in the vicinity of the Highland and Ellendale alternatives, to show people the direction technical research has taken. Both alternatives will continue to be evaluated equally. He outlined the next set of decision-making steps: publication of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement in late May; gathering public comment; analysis of public comment; CAC and Solution Team to make a recommendation from among the three alternatives (Highland, Ellendale, No Build). Deason asked why the Solution Team bothered to identify a preferred alternative at this point if the vote means so little. Mayfield said it was felt that people in the immediate area would like to know as soon as possible how the study appeared to be coming together. Wade Six said he attended a SOREDI meeting in March in White City that examined the features that make a strong economy. Relating the session to the South Medford Interchange process, he said the greatest danger to this community would be to do nothing; by failing to act, options are lost. He said something as to be done to improve traffic at the interchange soon, and the Interstate can't be rerouted (as some are suggesting) immediately.

Mike Montero said it might be nice to pool the money earmarked for the North and South Medford interchanges, and put that money toward building a bypass, but action must be taken to improve traffic safety now. The bypass would be a long-term project, and that maybe the community should begin now and look 40 years ahead at projected needs. He said making road improvements like the proposed interchange in an established urban area is difficult because of impacts on established neighborhoods. In this case, however, steps have been taken to mitigate impacts. If the project does not proceed, and development is prohibited as a result, the development will occur elsewhere in the valley. The Highland Alternative isn't the perfect solution, but the worst option for the community would be to do nothing.

Deason said he agreed that the community needs to be informed of the impacts of traffic, for example the expansion of Barnett Road to six lanes.

Six said an example of what could happen in Medford if nothing is done at the interchange occurred in Portland, where development restrictions caused an explosion of bedroom communities, with no solution to traffic problems.

Montero asked the audience how many walked or bicycled to the meeting. Noting that only one person responded, he asked what it would take to get people out of their cars. He suggested the projects like Medford's "Southeast plan,'' is designed to make walking for errands easier than driving, and is a step in the right direction.

4. Potential Impacts of the No-Build Alternative

Dan Moore, RVCOG regional transportation planner, presented a handout and talked about some of the potential impacts of leaving the interchange as it is, with perhaps only minimal improvements. Delays at intersections would worsen, and the queuing on Interstate 5 travel lanes would lengthen, increasing the risk of high-speed collisions. Safety was one of the main purposes for the project, he noted.

Jon Deason asked whether large employers in the area had staggered their work shifts, and was told they had.

Jean Milgram asked when the queuing occurred because she frequently drives the Interstate, but has never seen it happen. She was told that it was a morning and early evening rush hour occurrence. Tim Alford said that he sees it happen regularly. Frank Stevens said the concern is not the length of time the queuing occurs, but that it happens at all. Both ODOT and Oregon State Police have received complaints about the back-ups. Stevens noted that under the No-Build Alternative, some $2.15 million in improvements would be done, but there would continue to be safety problems. He outlined five projects that would have to be done under the No-Build, as listed in Table 1 of Moore's handout. Moore said a land-use goal is to have compact growth in the urban core. The Alternative Mobility Standards (AMS) allow that kind of development to continue in the project area while necessary improvements are made to increase capacity of the interchange. If the interchange project does not proceed, both the AMS and development that would be permitted under the AMS probably would have to be re-evaluated. Moore recalled that until adoption of the AMS, permits had been denied for developments that would increase traffic around the interchange. If the community were to revert back to that situation, the city might miss opportunities for compact and pedestrian-friendly development. Without the project, there also could be an economic impact for businesses in the area being denied permits to expand. Air quality could be threatened by traffic congestion and an increase in driving because of sprawling rather the compact development.

Dave Mayfield that total vehicle miles traveled would increase, and the peak congestion period at the interchange would increase from 1 to 4 hours a day. That would create unhealthy air quality "hot spots,'' traffic and air quality analyses show. Also, studies show that the project would reduce total energy consumed in the interchange area by 20 percent, which is a huge impact.

Wade Six and Moore said the area is close to air quality limits now.
Mike Montero said that in the Interstate corridor, diesel emissions are a concern. If congestion causes more trucks to slow down, emissions would increase, further degrading air quality.

5. Report on RVMPO Interchange Meeting

Jon Deason recounted the Rogue Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization's public forum on April 3, 2001, on South Medford Interchange planning. He said the meeting generally went well, although too many people seemed confused by the display of the alternatives studied. He said Jim Hanks did a good job of explaining the planning process.

John Ferris said he listened to people at the MPO meeting and read Medford City Councilman Jim Key's opinion piece in the Medford Mail Tribune criticizing the project. He said people seemed to be upset with growth, not really any ODOT action.

6. Role of CAC Members as Project Ambassadors

Jon Deason said some elected officials seem to be favoring the No-Build Alternative.
John Ferris said he is confused by the apparent contradiction in the Medford City Council's approval of Rogue Valley Manor development plans and the No-Build argument presented by one council member in the newspaper.

Jean Milgram said there is a bigger traffic problem in the area and the build alternatives are just a Band-aid that solves the Interstate traffic problems but not Medford's traffic problems. If both build alternatives were rejected, that would force the state to look at the larger scope of the traffic problem. The CAC has to think of more than ODOT's concern with the Interstate. Otherwise, ODOT could have simply designed a project without a CAC.
Mike Montero said the CAC's role is restricted, but Medford, Jackson County and regional planning groups are looking at the broader traffic issues.

John Morrison said the CAC did initially look at a wide range of potential project solutions covering an area beyond the interchange. Another CAC role is to take information back to the community.

Wade Six said a bigger issue is economic data showing the workers here earn 70 cents for every $1 earned nationally. To improve the wage scale, the area needs to attract higher-paying industry. No Build doesn't further that cause.

Morrison read portions of a public statement about the project's benefits that were part of a statement Frank Stevens made to the Medford City Council, and contained in an ODOT informational ad in the Mail Tribune.

Dave Mayfield said the CAC was part of a design process envisioned by Frank Stevens for community collaboration – a new process for ODOT.

7. Public Input

John Morrison opened the meeting for public comment.

Don Thomson said he favors building a South Stage Interchange. He asked how the CAC and project staff defined "living wage.'' He said Medford is not encouraging living-wage businesses. Regarding the building alternatives, he said they wouldn't work because when a train comes through, 40 lanes of traffic would be blocked, causing the plan to fail. The planning has been a misuse of tax money. Some members of the team don't care about neighborhoods.

Scott McKay said both of the build alternatives are bad because they enable behaviors that need to change: People need to walk more. He said streets should not be widened. Highland is a difficult street to walk along, and the alternatives would make it worse. He said the No Build should be pursued as a way to articulate the need for a real solution, which would be moving Interstate 5 out of Medford.

A man who also attended the RVMPO meeting said he is disturbed by ODOT estimating that the project would have a 20-year life. A prudent use of money would be to build a bypass, taking the $44 million for this project and the money from North Medford Interchange too.

The community should move now, taking advantage of the momentum already being generated by this project.

Barbara Griffin said neither build alternative is a solution. She said both are in the wrong place; that South Stage Road is the right place. She asked who the Solution Team is and said the public apparently should have been bringing concerns to them, not the CAC. She said she does not want to sacrifice her East Medford neighborhood for a Southeast planned development. She said she does not care about jobs if it means sacrificing her neighborhood.

A woman wanted to know more about moving the Interstate.

Susan Hand said the Build Alternatives are designed to fail. The Interstate should be moved. She said favoring the No Build doesn't mean that nothing should be done. Regarding the need to do something now, she said the community could spend $16 million to upgrade bus service, which would reduce traffic. She said greed is driving the growth and the community needs to stop subsidizing the automobile. As for the traffic backing up onto the freeway, the problem would be easy to solve and that she could do it herself with a can of spray paint. She said the Alternative Mobility Standards put people at risk.

A man said that unless a person has a death wish, they have no business bicycling along local roads. He suggested rerouting southbound traffic to Garfield Street, and northbound traffic to Highland, moving the freeway ramps accordingly, and building the South Stage Interchange.

Jim Key said he was not trying to be disruptive, but without connecting to North Phoenix Road the problem of moving motorists away from Barnett won't be solved. He suggested going with the No Build Alternative now, and begin to study the construction of a Medford bypass connector from South Stage Road, through the foothills to Highway 140. He said he feared that if the state proceeds with one of the Build Alternatives, Medford would never in 20-30 years get the bypass. As the situation is now, the city is in the position of helping the state make Medford's traffic problems worse.

8. CAC Comfort Check

John Morrison asked CAC members to express the level of comfort with the process.
Jane Podolski responded to the comments favoring a South Stage Interchange, noting that the project would not be as simple as some people seem to think. It would raise many issues, as well as problems obtaining the land.

Tim Alford said someone should address the public concerns, and the need to be good stewards of the public's money. The Build Alternatives would solve the problem, but he was struggling with the question of whether they would be best in the long term.
Jim Buckley said he was wondering if maybe the team should back up and do the project right, taking the larger picture into consideration.

Mike Mahar said the traffic modeling is right for the South Medford Interchange Project, and he has no problem with that. But it was a narrow scope for the south interchange specifically. That is why South Stage didn't weigh in perhaps as it should, as it would have if the modeling had been set for the entire area. If the modeling took in the whole area, taking into consideration the future growth patterns and needs, South Stage would probably have weighed in higher. At this particular time, the need that is before us now, the South Interchange is the solution for today, whereas South Stage will probably be the solution for the future.

Jean Milgram said that regarding CAC members' role as ambassadors for the project, she could support the process and still not agree with a particular decision. No Build to her means not pursuing one of the Build Alternatives, not doing nothing.

Mike Montero said he likes the South Stage proposal, but federal funding regulations require that existing facilities be improved as much as possible before facilities are added. So the fastest route to getting a South Stage interchange would be to implement one of the plans at South Medford.

John Ferris said he was uncomfortable with the limited scope of the project, and likes the suggestions of a bypass. The scope of the project should have taken in those kinds of proposals.

Frank Stevens said that regarding moving Interstate 5 with the creation of a Medford bypass, some large issues would have to be settled including where it would be put. The route would require a 200-foot-wide swath of roadway with three or four interchanges leading into the core of Medford at various locations. Neighborhoods would be disrupted by the creation of the new interchange arterials, and the county would lose farmland. There would be issues of freeway-oriented businesses and whether they would leave existing commercial zones to be close to the new route. He estimated such a project would cost about $1 billion. Before the Federal Highway Administration would fund such a project, the community would have to prove the need and prove that everything had been done to improve existing facilities. Regarding South Stage Road, he said the interchange probably would be a good project, but it would not fix Barnett Road problems.

Wade Six said the community needs to face the reality that if it passes up this funding and project opportunity, it may not have such an opportunity again. And it would be hard to get $1 billion if the decision now is to do nothing.

9. Adjournment

John Morrison adjourned the meeting at 7:30 p.m.