

Oregon Department of Transportation

# 2015-2018 STIP Enhance Process Evaluation

*Executive Summary: Post Application Interviews and Online  
Survey Results*

by JLA Public Involvement  
9/12/2013



## I. Introduction

### **1) Background and Purpose of the Evaluation**

The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) implemented a new project selection process for the 2015-2018 Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) cycle. This process responded to: 1) a growing interest among ODOT's stakeholders and partners in breaking down the funding "silos" to allow a more flexible and holistic approach to funding transportation improvements; 2) changes in federal funding requirements with the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21) legislation; 3) an overall decreasing amount of funding for transportation; and 4) an interest in strengthening the role of ODOT's local partners in identifying priorities for transportation improvements of statewide and regional importance in their areas.

For the 2015-2018 STIP cycle, several previously separate funds and application procedures were combined to create the STIP Enhance funding process. In order to evaluate the process, ODOT asked JLA Public Involvement to conduct interviews with individuals who played a key role in the project review and selection process. JLA also administered an online survey of STIP Enhance program applicants and application reviewers. The survey and interviews were meant to assess how well the project selection process worked, how the process could be improved, and whether participants believed this approach should be continued. The results of the survey and interviews will be used by the Oregon Transportation Commission (OTC) to help refine and improve the next STIP project selection process. This document summarizes the results of the interviews and survey.

The survey and interviews were designed to assist with a qualitative assessment of the Enhance process; neither was structured to provide statistically significant results. Please note that all graphs in this summary represent responses provided by survey respondents only, not by interviewees. Also, for simplicity, general references to Area Commissions on Transportation (ACTs) throughout these reports include Region 1's STIP Selection Committee.

### **2) Survey and Interview Participants**

JLA interviewed 36 leaders of the STIP Enhance review process. Interviewees included the chairs of each of the ACTs and the two statewide review committees, ODOT region managers, and other key Enhance process management staff. The online survey was completed by 146 people. This included 99 people who applied for STIP Enhance funds, and 84 people who reviewed applications. Survey respondents included ACT members, applicants, statewide review committee members, and ODOT staff; Region 2 represented the largest number of respondents, and Region 1 represented the smallest.

### **3) Major Outcomes**

*There were generally positive perceptions about the potential of the new process.*

Although there were strong exceptions and a number of recommendations for improving the process, most interviewees and survey respondents believed that the Enhance process provides the potential of improving the project selection process. The primary concern expressed by those opposed was that the state's responsibility for the statewide and regional systems would be neglected and that the funds intended for those priorities would be diverted to local projects.

The lack of specific project selection criteria was a key issue throughout the evaluation. While many participants were neutral about this, and some supported it, this approach was a major concern for a significant number of survey respondents and interviewees. Based on comments, it appears that the primary concern was less about the need for a specific set of rigid criteria than for a common understanding of what reviewers would be looking for so that applicants could know whether and how to present their projects, and to ensure that the ACT project selection process would be transparent, defensible and not politicized.

## **II. Interviews – Key Findings**

The interviews were conducted throughout July 2013, when the ACTs had finalized their 150% list of projects, but before they completed their recommended 100% list. Most ACT chairs were interviewed following the July OTC workshop. The Interviews Summary Report presents more complete information, but following are the key findings:

### **1) Wide variation in process**

While the same principles guided the process throughout the state, there was a wide variation in how the STIP Enhance process was conducted by the various committees and groups. Key differences included how applications were reviewed, the role of ODOT and other agency staff, the use of the benefits and additional criteria in the review, and the emphasis on statewide and regional significance.

### **2) Support for continuing the Enhance Process**

The ACT interviewees overwhelmingly (but not universally) supported this process as an appropriate path, with some major to minor adjustments. ODOT region staff and the statewide review committees were more divided; some felt the current process could only lead to degradation of the state system and statewide priorities, while others felt it created great opportunities to develop stronger local partners and/or a more integrated system.

### **3) Optimism for the future but mixed perspectives on the success of this round**

While most interviewees were optimistic about the overall potential of the process, perspectives were very mixed about how the process—as it stands—could improve or degrade the variety and/or quality of projects.

### **4) Mixed perspectives on the need for criteria**

The call for a common set of project review and selection criteria appeared to be driven by two primary factors: 1) a lack of faith that the OTC would not ultimately follow unwritten criteria; and 2) the role of statewide or regional significance needed to be better characterized. The benefits appeared to have been seen as criteria by applicants who tried to address all benefit areas.

### **5) Lack of funding and time**

The limited amount of funding was the most universally mentioned challenge to improving the quality and variety of projects. Many interviewees also cited the lack of time—particularly time to prepare for the new process—as a challenge specific to this round.

### **6) Statewide and regional needs versus local needs**

While most ACT chairs did not believe their group had made choices on a political basis, a number of interviewees cautioned that this more local-based process presents a strong potential for politicizing the selection of projects rather than focusing on the best projects overall. A number of interviewees expressed a concern that if this process continues, there needs to be clear guidance on how to support the statewide and regional system.

### **7) Unclear role of the statewide review committees**

The role of the statewide review committees was unclear to the ACTs and to the statewide review committees, and timing of their input resulted in little influence on the ACTs' deliberations.

### **8) Praise for ODOT and peers**

Nearly all chairs had high praise for the ODOT staff that supported their efforts and expressed a high level of confidence in the combined judgment of their peers on the groups they chaired.

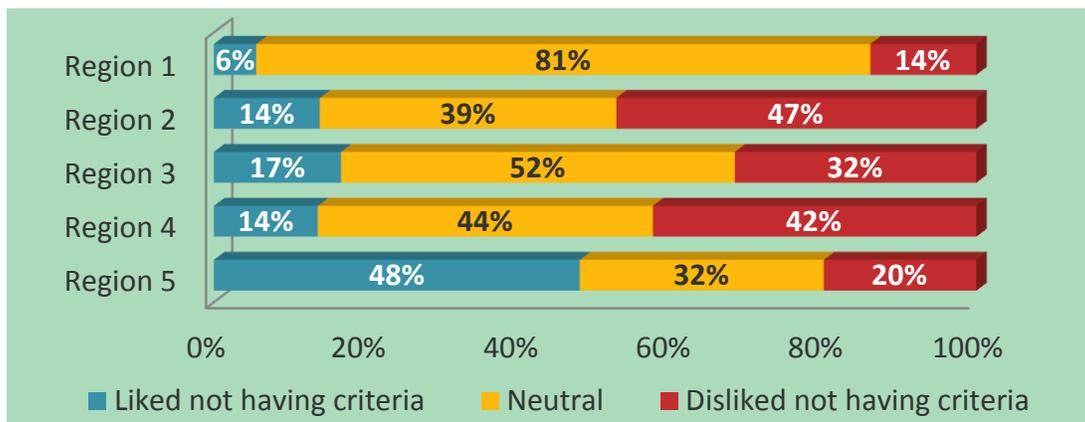
## **III. Survey – Key Findings**

### **1) Feedback From All Respondents (Reviewers And Applicants)**

**Mixed reactions to the lack of review criteria.** Applicants and reviewers across the regions had different responses to the lack of criteria for review of applications. Many applicants

commented that the OTC guidance did not provide enough direction on how applications would be judged. They were concerned that ACTs would be too subjective in scoring. Reviewers struggled with a lack of guidance on how to score projects across different modes. Those who liked not having criteria appreciated that the new process focuses on values.

**How did you feel about not having specific review criteria?**

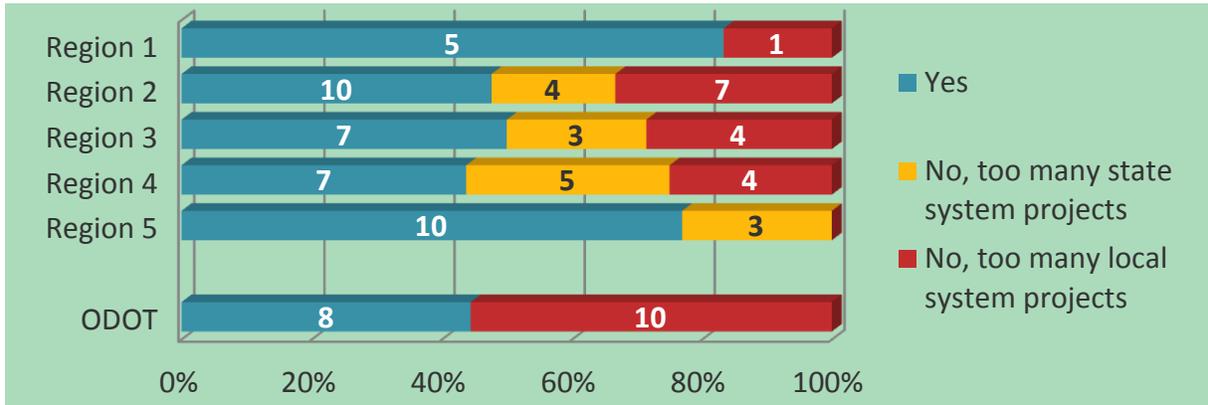


**Generally positive that this process will improve projects selected.** The majority of survey respondents felt that the Enhance process will improve the projects selected for funding in the STIP. Reviewers from ODOT had the most concern about the pool of projects selected, particularly the amount of projects of statewide significance.

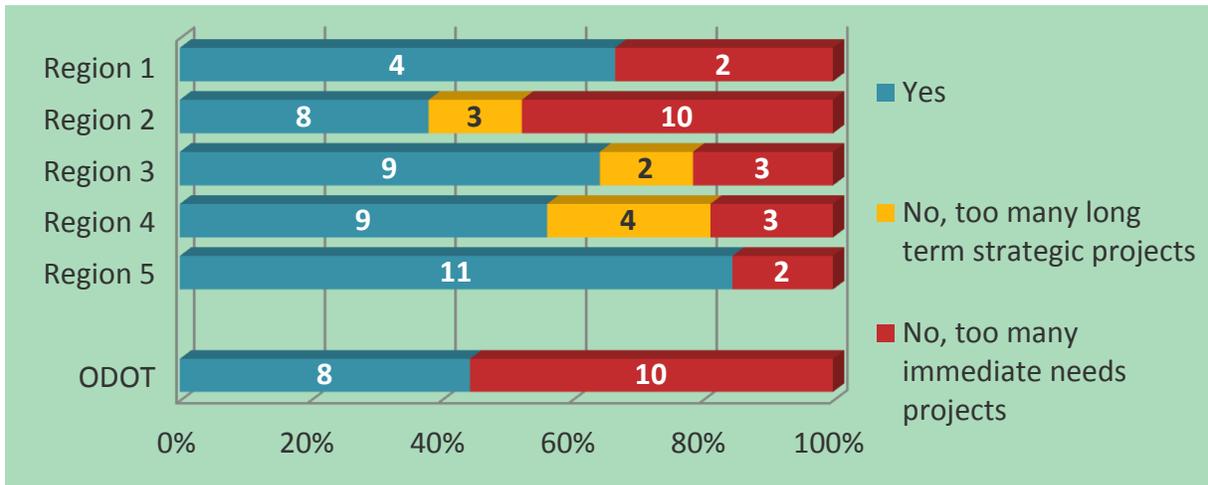
**2) Reviewer Feedback**

**Concern about mix of projects.** Many statewide review committee participants and ODOT staff were concerned that the process would result in too few projects of statewide significance. There were several suggestions to set aside specific funds for projects of statewide significance to solve bigger transportation issues. Reviewers in Regions 2, 4, and 5 commented that small bicycle and pedestrian projects were overrepresented in the project mix.

**Do you feel that the right mixture of state system vs. local system projects is likely to come out of the STIP Enhance process?**



**Do you feel that the right mixture of long term strategic projects vs. projects that address immediate needs is likely to come out of the STIP Enhance process?**



**Difficulty prioritizing projects at the Super ACT (a region’s ACTs together) and statewide review committee level.** ODOT reviewers and members of statewide review committees commented that they found it difficult to review and prioritize applications that were not reviewed using the same criteria and principles. Some participants also cited the lack sufficient local knowledge to be able to discuss projects from different ACT areas.

**3) Applicant Feedback**

**Different levels of understanding of what to do with the application.** Applicants generally felt that the amount of effort required to fill out the application was appropriate, that application questions were easy to understand, and that they knew what was expected of them to effectively present their project. Applicants in Regions 3 and 4 seemed to struggle most with

the application and expectations. Their main concern was a lack of criteria and not knowing what reviewers would be looking for.

**Difficulty with addressing project benefits.** Many applicants struggled with the project benefits section of the application because they felt compelled to speak to all project benefits. As a result, reviewers struggled with identifying the key benefits of an application.

**Concern that higher-level committees would trump the ACTs.** Many applicants and ACT review members questioned whether separate priorities of the statewide review committees and/or politicization of the Super ACTs would invalidate the work of the local ACTs.

**Good communication from ODOT.** Applicants said that the assistance they received from ODOT was very helpful. Many survey respondents said that ODOT's technical assistance was vital, particularly for rural regions and those with less technical capabilities.

**Some concern about turning away from separate "pots" of funding.** Many survey respondents struggled with the new process that lumps together previously separate funding streams and requires different project types to compete together.

**Not enough opportunity for partnership and collaboration.** Some funding applicants felt there was not enough time or ability to partner with different jurisdictions to submit joint proposals. They suggested that the process encourage or facilitate partnerships between jurisdictions to apply together for combined funding of projects to provide joint transportation solutions.

#### **IV. Recommendations for Next Steps**

The OTC and ODOT management are now preparing to initiate the process for the next STIP cycle. This section does not provide recommendations for specific changes to the process—JLA recognizes that the OTC and ODOT management have many factors to consider when establishing project selection processes. Rather, these recommendations address process steps that JLA believes would be appropriate and responsive in addressing the challenges identified through this evaluation.

##### ***1) Reconvene the STIP stakeholder advisory committee***

The diversity of interests that have historically been represented on this group will continue to provide for the balance, context and experience that has influenced the evolution of ODOT's focus on an integrated, multi-modal system.

##### ***2) Establish a clear set of questions for the stakeholder deliberation process***

Many of the issues and challenges identified through the interviews and online survey would benefit from a robust public discussion. With the STIP stakeholder advisory committee in place, ODOT should provide the committee with a clear charge to discuss the following issues: guidance for determining projects of statewide significance; what level of consistency in process is needed statewide or within regions; how to ensure transparency and accountability of decision making while retaining flexibility to adapt to the unique needs and dynamics of each area; etc. However, it is critical that the OTC and ODOT provide very clear guidance on which issues are open for discussion and which decisions have already been made.

### ***3) Increase deliberation with and among ACTs***

Given the elevated role of the ACTs in the Enhance process, it is critical that the leadership of the ACTs have a deep understanding of and commitment to the intent, principles, roles and steps of the process. This comes not just from direct ODOT and OTC communication with the individual ACTs, but with involvement in statewide discussions. The benefit to the individual ACT processes was evident in the interviews with ACTs that had key members who had been directly involved in ODOT statewide policy groups and through the responses of ACT chairs who had participated in the July OTC workshop.

### ***4) Identify the issues that will be addressed by the OTC and ODOT***

The stakeholder deliberation process needs clear policy parameters. For instance, while the OTC may choose to engage stakeholders on the process for identifying and selecting projects of statewide and/or regional significance, any OTC expectations for these projects need to be clearly established and communicated. Similarly, the relationship of the ACTs' Enhance project list to other Enhance funds (such as this cycle's 20%), and the role of the statewide review committees will need to be clarified.

In summary, the 2015-2018 STIP Enhance Process was seen as a major step toward a more inclusive project selection process that has the potential of moving Oregon further toward its goals of developing a more integrated and multimodal transportation system. Interviewees and online survey respondents raised a number of concerns, issues and suggestions for improving the process while acknowledging that, in principle, the process was a step in the right direction.