

**Conference Trip Report
National League of Cities, December 2012**

Councilmember Moylan

As usual, this report does not include all of the sessions that I attended, but extracts only the things I learned that might be useful for council, staff, or citizens to know. Those things fell into three areas: transportation, sustainability, and public-private partnerships.

Transportation

Federal funding for road projects is largely generated from a national gasoline tax, which is not sustainable at current levels (it has been declining while costs have been increasing) and is becoming even less sustainable as hybrid and electric vehicles gain market share. The political will to increase this tax does not exist in Congress. At the Transportation, Infrastructure, and Services policy committee meeting, we heard from the Mileage-Based User Fee Alliance, a nonprofit coalition of transportation agencies and other stakeholders who are pushing to fill the growing gap by extending existing systems like FasTrak beyond toll booths and high-occupancy vehicle lanes to all roads that use Federal funding. Caltrans is one of many state and city departments of transportation to join, along with companies that participate in building transportation infrastructure, like CH2M Hill. It would be useful to have VTA join this alliance since so many local drivers already use FasTrak, because toll booths would go away and driving times would decrease.

Boston's Big Dig removed the elevated structure for Interstate 93 and put the whole freeway underground through the city. They say it was the most expensive road infrastructure project in American history. The new surface at street level is a linear "greenway," the Rose Kennedy Greenway, for which we got a bus tour. The linear park has play areas, public art areas, and places for public performances.

Boston's "T" system now has the Silver Line, which is bus rapid transit. The ride from the airport to the convention center area took only ten minutes. The Silver Line goes through electrified tunnels, and uses hybrid vehicles, so that the buses run on electricity in the tunnels, then emerge and can drive down city streets using their diesel engines. The line can thus carry passengers beyond the areas where tunnels have been constructed. Both the tunnels and the vehicles are very expensive, but they apparently found it more valuable to be able to extend the routes than to run subway trains on tracks.

The December 1 Boston Globe announced that the Government Center subway stop, a key intersection between the Green and Blue lines, will have to close for two years for a 90 million-dollar renovation. The cause? To bring it into compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, perhaps the most expensive unfunded Federal government mandate in history.

Sustainability

A number of sessions at this conference focused on how to measure a city's sustainability level. Most cities are now actively trying to become more sustainable, but in order to do that, one needs to be able to measure sustainability. The Leadership Training Institute class I took introduced one approach, called the STAR Communities Index. STAR (Sustainability Tools for Assessing and Rating) Communities is a nonprofit company (www.starcommunities.org) that was launched

by NLC, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, the US Green Building Council, and the Center for American Progress. STAR's rating system is online; its goal is to use data that cities are already collecting for other purposes. One of the results of that is that their sustainability measures use an extremely broad definition of that word, including many quality of life measures that seem to me to go beyond sustainability, if that word is to have any meaning. Their tool generates a city ranking that can be up to five stars, based on a point total. Like Sunnyvale's system, it uses measurable outcomes.

Representatives of several cities spoke during two different workshops on such measurements and particular methods they have used. Philadelphia uses a free tool from EPA called EnergyStar Portfolio Manager to score the energy uses of buildings in their city, public and private (<http://tiny.cc/PortfolioManagerOverview>). Given the mandates coming down from the legislature, it is likely that we will have to do something like this in the future. Pasadena, which is about the same size as Sunnyvale, has the residence location of every city employee on a map, and works to minimize the travel time to work (Sunnyvale, of course, got praise from the county grand jury for doing this with regard to public safety employees in case of a disaster). Pasadena's downtown, which was revitalized largely by installing parking meters and using the revenue to fix the area up, has a "park once" policy for that downtown. They use a commercially available tool called WalkScore to determine which amenities are within walking distance of any given city location. They also are implementing the use of MMLOS, multimodal level of service to replace the standard LOS numbers. They try to determine travel times when possible instead of intersection levels of service, because "traffic engineers push back on MMLOS."

In a green infrastructure workshop, a Philadelphia Parks and Rec official stated that "you don't necessarily need to create more green space, you just need to 'green up' your existing infrastructure." That matched a TED talk by the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, who said "If you don't have open spaces, you have to go in there and open some spaces." One side benefit they found in Philadelphia when replacing impervious asphalt basketball courts with permeable ones was that the sound of bouncing basketballs decreased so much that neighbors called the city to congratulate the staff. The DPW director of Franklin, MA, whose water supply comes entirely from wells, noted that, like Sunnyvale, they base sewer charges on water usage, rather than on actual sewer usage, which you may recall several of our citizens have complained about. When I asked him why, given citizen objections, he replied that Franklin does it because "we have a strong city council; it's the right thing to do. It encourages water conservation." Councilmember Matthew Appelbaum of Boulder, CO, followed me out into the hall after this session and told me that they base their sewer charges on the water use during the winter months, and assume that increases during the summer are due to landscape watering that does not require sewer use. That seemed like a rational approach for a city like ours that tries hard to charge citizens what the actual costs are to deliver the service. The exposition hall had an interesting example of green infrastructure: SWARCO Traffic Americas, a Sunnyvale company (from the Plug and Play Tech Center on Wolfe Road) that provides adaptive LED traffic lights. They have the ability to be adjusted to any fraction of their maximum brightness based on use patterns or time of day. Sunnyvale should include these in its trials of LED traffic lights. 408-524-3053.

Public-private partnerships

This topic was of interest given that council has asked staff to explore possible public-private partnerships to redo the civic center.

Host city Boston has a Private Industry Council that oversees a variety of these partnerships. “Mayor Menino launches partnerships on a regular basis,” said the director. “You are in a city that takes intermediary work seriously. Who does the brokering; the connecting?” One of the Mayor’s initiatives is the Million Pound Challenge to tackle obesity, which those of us who had taken a mobile workshop on this initiative ended up contributing to: we were all given pedometers, and the number of steps we took during the workshop was counted as part of the Boston effort, since they took place in Boston. Blue Cross-Blue Shield participates in this partnership. Another health operation, the Brigham and Women’s Hospital, participates in several educational partnerships because it is a teaching hospital and education is part of its mission. The educational system in Boston apparently has some severe challenges: the systemwide graduation rate is 64%. One impression I got is that several of these partnerships are trying to address problems that would not exist if the school system were healthy. One example is the youth summer jobs program funded by local corporation John Hancock Financial Services, which was started in response to an epidemic of youth violence. The company funds the salaries, and the work is done for nonprofit corporations in the city, not for John Hancock. Adult employment issues are dealt with by another partnership, called Skillworks. In this case, training is funded by a variety of charitable and corporate foundations, but not by any employers directly. The last partnership described by its director, a professional women’s soccer player from Boston who went to Brown University, was Boston Scholar Athletes. This was created in response to a seven-part Boston Globe series on high school athletics, showing that facilities and conditions were usually grossly inadequate, and that Boston’s weak minimum GPA requirement of 1.67 for participation in sports was often not being met. Local sporting goods manufacturer New Balance is a participant in the program, which provides facility space, coaching academies, and SAT training with a slogan of “academic achievement through athletics.” The graduation rate for program participants is 84%, a huge improvement over the citywide number.