

## House transportation bill could bring major changes to Lee County

On June 18, Rep. James Oberstar (D-MN) and Rep. John Mica (R-FL), chair and ranking member respectively of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, released their bipartisan reauthorization bill blueprint, providing the first glimpse of what the next transportation authorization bill might look like.

BikeWalkLee is heartened by this blueprint and its implications for a serious overhaul of our federal transportation program. It calls for many forward-thinking recommendations for building a safe, clean and smart transportation system.

While this massive bill still faces consideration by the House committee and the full Congress, we recognize that only by setting a clear direction can any change be realized. While this initiative may not be the final word on the future of our nation's transportation system — and will surely engender healthy debate in the months to come — our initial analysis offers some heartening new directions for those who believe that complete streets are essential to a efficient and effective transportation system for our region and our nation.

Among the major themes in the bill are an emphasis on transit and livability, and an increase in the power of local Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) — two trends that could have significant impact on Lee County's transportation future.

A quick review of the bill's highlights shows how Lee County may benefit from this new proposal:

**Performance based framework:** The Oberstar bill contains national performance objectives and measures, and for many new and existing programs the bill requires DOT to set performance measures and targets. States and localities must then establish performance measures and targets that support these national objectives.

For Lee County, a performance-based system should require local transportation efforts to provide equitable access to transportation, ensure the safety of all users and reduce our carbon footprint, among other goals. For example, in order for Lee County to meet a local MPO greenhouse gas reduction target, the county will need to develop and implement a strategy to greater increase the share of alternative modes of transportation.

**Complete streets:** The bill calls for “comprehensive street design policies and principles,” and makes clear that this is defined as complete streets.

On June 17, the Lee County Smart Growth Committee adopted a comprehensive Complete Streets resolution which it transmitted to county commissioners for action, now scheduled for Aug. 4. Adoption and implementation during 2009-2010 will put the county in a leadership position, giving us a head start on implementing the many transformative features of the reauthorization legislation.

The Lee County MPO has considered requiring accommodations for bike/pedestrian/transit facilities in road designs. This policy positions all the jurisdictions in Lee County in line with the complete streets policy direction coming from Washington, which may put Lee County in a more immediate position to meet federal requirements and compete for grant funds.

**Office of Livability:** In a major break from the past, the bill sets goals for transportation in terms of improving the livability and environmental sustainability of communities. This will change the paradigm of planning, designing and funding road projects to include complete street designs, and can provide important tools for assisting our local efforts on complete streets, smart growth and transit-oriented development.

The strong policy that bicyclists and pedestrians are equal users of the transportation system should send a clear signal to state and local transportation officials that roads are to be designed and constructed for all users. Having data on use of sustainable transportation and its benefits will be helpful in educating the public, and will give us the tools to set performance targets and track progress.

**Public transportation:** Lee County's transit system is small, both in funding and ridership. It consists of limited bus routes that serve primarily the "transportation disadvantaged" groups. The county could benefit from the two new discretionary grant programs. The mandate of the Office of Livability with its focus on a closer link between work and home could present new opportunities to redefine our transit system as a way of reducing our carbon footprint and making communities more livable.

Under the urbanized area formula grant, given the population of our area up to 10% of the funds in this program can be spent on operating expenses, which should provide some relief for LeeTran. Also, the reforms in the New Start program could make it easier for Lee County to compete for grants to fund a new light-rail project.

**Safety:** The Oberstar bill places greater emphasis on safety, both by doubling the investments in those activities and by establishing national and state performance targets for reducing fatalities and injuries on our roads.

Currently, bicyclists and pedestrians account nationally for 13% of fatalities on roadways, but less than 1% of safety funding is spent on improvements to make roads safer for bicyclists and pedestrians. In the past, Lee County has received little if any safety improvement funding for bike and pedestrian safety.

A data-driven safety program will drive funding towards the most serious of safety issues. Given our high bike and pedestrian fatality and injury rates, performance targets with consequences should bring needed focus on improving these statistics through actions that will address the problems.

In addition, research shows that streets designed to accommodate all modes of travel can significantly reduce injuries, deaths, and automobile crashes. Implementing a complete streets policy, as proposed by the Smart Growth Committee, is one of the actions the county can take to improve our performance.

**Environment & greenhouse gases:** The Fort Myers/Cape Coral metro area's carbon footprint is among the highest of the 100 metro areas in the U.S. — only five metro areas in the nation have worse per capita carbon emissions caused by autos.

At the same time, only 3.8% of Lee County residents use alternate means of transportation to commute to work, compared to the 9.4% national average. Of that number, public transit to commute to work is only used by 1.2% of Lee County residents compared to 4.9% nationally.

The Lee County MPO will be required to develop emission reduction targets and strategies designed to meet national goals, and performance against those targets will be tracked and have consequences. Reducing driving is a relatively quick and simple means to reduce emissions; thus the county might focus on increasing its share and support options for people who walk, bike and take public transit.

**More local control of State Transportation Program funds:** The bill changes the distribution of Transportation Enhancement (TE) funding (used primarily for bicycle and pedestrian projects) from this "off-the-top" 10 percent set-aside controlled by the state to a requirement that states distribute TE funds through the state based on population, and 10 percent of such funds in each area must be spent on TEs.

This new approach could benefit Lee County, since we have never received our "fair share" of TE dollars going to Florida DOT District 1. Lee County has more than \$50 million worth of bike/pedestrian projects identified that could be considered for TE funding. Having these decisions made at the local level is a major improvement, both in funds available and the grant selection process.

**MPO reforms:** The bill reforms the MPO process in a variety of ways: It expands the scope of MPO planning and expands its policy goals to include decreased reliance on foreign oil, environmental impacts, greenhouse gas emissions, and livability and sustainability.

Having the Lee County MPO develop and track performance measures and targets on these key goals will provide valuable tools in making sure county projects and policies are aimed at solving the problems identified as national goals, and providing accountability to the public.

To be eligible for the Metropolitan Mobility and Access Program, an entity must be an MPO "that serves a metropolitan planning area that encompasses, in whole or in part, an urbanized area with a population of more than 500,000 individuals. As noted earlier, when the 2010 Census is completed, Lee County should qualify for Tier 2 of this new grant program. If the Lee MPO were to apply and be awarded one of these grants, the county could see an increase in funds available to meet local mobility needs and it would also gain new authority to transfer its highway funds into transit projects.

The bill's principles reflect significant changes in the way the federal DOT has operated. The Oberstar bill, coupled with the Obama administration's current direction, will cause Lee County to rethink its land

use and transportation policies. Ultimately, this bill supports the county leadership in making the hard choices necessary to create more livable communities. How these new initiatives will be paid for and getting them approved amid the current flurry of national legislation remain open questions, but the bill's focus on sustainable alternate transportation and the need to invest in our country's transit infrastructure is a welcome addition to the national discussion.

BikeWalkLee is a coalition of local groups and individuals working to complete the streets in Lee County. On behalf anyone who walks, bikes or rides the bus, we think this bill maps a new direction for our national and local transportation system — and that's a welcome change of direction.

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BikeWalkLee representatives are available to provide background and quotes for any media outlet. Contact Dan Moser at 239.334.6417 or [dan@floridabicycle.org](mailto:dan@floridabicycle.org) to arrange interviews. Please visit the organization's Web site at [www.BikeWalkLee.org](http://www.BikeWalkLee.org) for more information, statistics and background.