

**NVTC-PRTC JOINT COMMISSION WORKING GROUP  
PROGRAM ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
MEETING SUMMARY  
Via Electronic Participation  
Public Streaming via YouTube  
APRIL 22, 2021**

NVTC-PRTC Joint Commission Working Group Members Present via Electronic Participation:

Jeff McKay, Chair  
Elizabeth Bennett-Parker  
Libby Garvey  
Elizabeth Guzman (PRTC)  
Jeanette Rishell (PRTC)  
Gary Skinner (PRTC)

Program Advisory Committee Members Present via Electronic Participation:

David Snyder, Chair  
Elizabeth Bennett-Parker  
John Foust  
Libby Garvey  
David Meyer  
Michael R. Turner

Staff and Others Present via Electronic Participation:

Kate Mattice, NVTC Executive Director  
Bob Schneider, PRTC Executive Director  
Allan Fye  
Ben Owen  
Jae Watkins  
Dinah Girma  
Joe Stainsby  
Todd Horsley

Ms. Mattice called the meeting to order at 1:03 p.m. She explained that given the ongoing COVID-19 public health emergency, the meeting is being conducted electronically. This is possible because the governor signed into law on April 22, 2020 a legislative amendment to the budget bill to allow public bodies to meet electronically without a physical quorum present to discuss or transact the business statutorily required or necessary to continue operations of that public body. Northern Virginia Transportation Commission staff followed the procedures and guidelines in the legislation to give notice to the NVTC Program Advisory Committee, NVTC-PRTC Joint Commission Working Group, Commission, staff and the public.

Ms. Mattice reviewed the procedures and instructions for the electronic meeting. The only visual component of the meeting is the presentation slides shown on WebEx for PAC members and on YouTube livestream for the public. Ms. Mattice then announced that no public comments were received for this meeting.

Ms. Mattice then provided an overview of the meeting agenda, which included an update on Commuter Choice in the I-395/95 Corridor for the NVTC-PRTC Joint Commission Working Group; followed by updates for the Program Advisory Committee on Commuter Choice in the I-66 Corridor, the Envision Route 7 Bus Rapid Transit Project and the Options for Zero-Fare and Reduced-Fare Transit in Northern Virginia Transit white paper that NVTC staff are preparing.

### **Joint Commission Working Group**

Chair McKay opened the Joint Commission Working Group portion of the meeting by outlining the meeting goal of endorsing a programming approach for Commuter Choice (I-395/95) Round Two (FY 2022-FY 2023) funding. He noted that NVTC held the Round Two call for projects from November 2020 to January 2021; 18 project applications were received with a total funding request of \$26 million. Following the eligibility review process and coordination with applicants, there were 13 remaining eligible projects with a total funding request of \$21.9 million. These projects have now been scored per the approved technical evaluation process.

Chair McKay explained that although toll revenue in general has been affected by the COVID-19 public health emergency, the full-time tolling in the 95 and 395 Express Lanes has provided some resiliency to the toll revenues collected by Transurban, the concessionaire for the Express Lanes, and NVTC anticipates full funding of approximately \$30 million for the Round Two program. Chair McKay indicated that the public comment period for the projects under consideration was still underway and that the comments received will be presented to both NVTC and PRTC in advance of any action to approve the program of projects. Once the program approvals occur by both Commissions and the CTB in June, implementation of the selected projects may begin at the beginning of fiscal year 2022.

Mr. Owen then provided an overview of the proposed projects. The projects for Round Two included three general categories: all-day enhancements to local bus routes; a range of efforts to rebuild ridership and serve expected future travel demand; and continuations of new and enhanced bus service funded in Round One. With 80% of Round Two funding requests coming from bus service-related proposals, staff will be closely monitoring applications for transit service in future funding rounds as the I-395/95 corridor program's memorandum of agreement with the Commonwealth establishes that no more than 50% of program funds over a five-year period may be allocated to transit operations. Future funding rounds will include a greater emphasis on capital investments.

Mr. Owen outlined the scoring process that was adopted in November 2020 and the results for the 13 projects under consideration for funding. Mr. Owen stated that staff believe that all the proposals, with scores ranging from 49 to 86 out of 100 possible points, would strongly support program goals of moving more people and creating viable new transportation options. Mr. Owen added that staff recommend that the Working Group endorse funding all 13 proposals subject to

the public comment received, as the total funding request is within the available funding. The proposed program would also include funding for NVTC's ongoing administration of the program, including oversight of the projects funded to date in the corridor. Mr. Owen referenced the public comment period and indicated that a virtual town hall meeting will take place later in the month to provide the public with the information on the program and the projects slated to be presented to both Commissions and the CTB.

Chair McKay asked Ms. Mattice and Mr. Schneider for any further comments. Ms. Mattice recapped that although travel demand decreased due to the public health emergency, traffic volumes have begun to increase and the strong projects proposed for Round Two funding would provide travel alternatives to support the rebound and move people more efficiently.

Chair McKay asked for questions and comments from other Working Group members. Mr. Skinner asked how to advertise the virtual town hall. Ms. Watkins responded that Working Group members could encourage constituents to follow the NVTC YouTube channel, as well as visit the Commuter Choice program website, which provides procedures and for submitting public comments. Ms. Rishell asked for further explanation of the diversion mitigation evaluation factor; Mr. Owen explained that diversion mitigation efforts include transit, vanpool and carpool projects that absorb car trips that might be diverted to local and arterial roadways due to congestion or tolling.

Ms. Garvey asked if staff considered a cutoff given the range of scores, what would happen to the funding if not all projects are approved and if there is a retrospective analysis of project performance. Mr. Owen answered that any leftover funding would roll-over to the next round. He also noted that the scoring range was narrower than in some prior funding rounds and that staff felt that all the proposals were qualitatively strong in terms of their alignment with corridor improvement goals. Mr. Owen added that NVTC's Commuter Choice program annual report includes a look-back at the performance of funded projects as well as analysis of traffic count and transit ridership data in both corridors.

Ms. Watkins provided more information on the month-long public comment period that is currently underway. During this time, NVTC is promoting the comment opportunity on various social media platforms and encouraging completion of a brief online survey through which feedback on individual projects can be provided. There is also a voicemail line. Ms. Guzman requested that public outreach also be provided in Spanish and other languages most spoken in Northern Virginia. Chair McKay offered that NVTC would investigate expanding the public engagement approach for future funding rounds to be as complete and equitable as possible.

Chair McKay provided closing remarks including indicating that the next Working Group meeting will be held in mid-2022, in advance of the Round Three call for projects.

The Joint Commission Working Group meeting adjourned at 1:40 p.m.

## **Program Advisory Committee Meeting**

Chair Snyder called the Program Advisory Committee meeting to order at 1:42 p.m. and reiterated that no public comments were received for the meeting. Chair Snyder outlined the agenda for the PAC meeting: Commuter Choice (I-66) Round Four funding; Review of the Envision Route 7 Bus Rapid Transit Planning efforts; and consideration of Zero-/Reduced-Fare Transit Programs.

Chair Snyder began with an overview of the Commuter Choice (I-66) agenda item. He noted that the COVID-19 public health emergency had sharply decreased the revenue available for new projects in the corridor and that when the Commission approved the \$4 million Initial (FY 2021) Round Four program last fall, there had been an expectation that additional funding would be available this spring. Chair Snyder asked Mr. Owen to provide more information on \$5 million that NVTC now expects to be available during fiscal year 2022, as well as information on a technical change that the Commonwealth is seeking to the program's memorandum of agreement.

Mr. Owen explained that in fall 2020 the Commission adopted a split programming approach for the Round Four (FY 2021-FY 2022) program due to revenue shortfalls brought about by the COVID-19 public health emergency. At that time, the Commission approved an initial (FY 2021) program of low-cost projects and endorsed advancing a supplemental (FY 2022) Round Four program in spring 2021 pending additional revenue. Staff now recommend deferring any action on a supplemental program until fall 2021, when NVTC anticipates receiving the \$5 million payment from the Commonwealth. Staff would seek to advance the program for approvals prior to opening the Round Five (FY 2023-FY 2024) call for projects in November.

Mr. Owen and Mr. Horsley outlined the proposed technical edits to the MOA, which will be presented to the Commission in May. The edits would correct an error identified by the Commonwealth that unintentionally constrains debt service payments for Long Bridge and/or Rosslyn Metrorail capital improvements, which were added to the MOA in January 2020 as potential uses of I-66 Inside the Beltway toll revenues, while protecting the payments due to NVTC for Commuter Choice (I-66).

Chair Snyder asked Ms. Mattice to confirm for the record, that the shift of the supplemental program from spring to fall 2021 is due to the lack of funding currently on hand for new projects. Ms. Mattice affirmed Chair Snyder's understanding and that staff would feel confident in advancing a conservative supplemental program this fall that could support some of the strong proposals remaining under consideration for Round Four funding. NVTC staff would aim to have the supplemental program presented for approval at the October Commission meeting before the Round Five call for projects opens in November.

Ms. Garvey asked if the Fairfax County Fare Buy Down project is a potential pilot for a low-zero/reduced-fare option. Mr. Owen explained that the project would provide subsidy for a portion of the fare of a specific bus service to bring the fare in line with other Fairfax Connector express routes. Mr. Foust suggested potentially moving the projects with small funding requests forward if that were an option.

Chair Snyder asked if the Committee needed to take any action on the Commuter Choice (I-66) matters. Ms. Mattice explained that no action was needed as the Round Four update and proposed MOA revisions were simply information items for the committee. She also reiterated that the proposed language change for the MOA does not affect or limit any revenues to be received by NVTC under the Commuter Choice program. DRPT leadership will provide a thorough presentation at the May Commission meeting.

Chair Snyder then introduced Mr. Fye to present the next agenda items: Envision Route 7 and the zero/reduced-fare transit options. NVTC staff has been leading an analysis of a bus rapid transit (BRT) system for a couple years to service Route 7 corridor. The BRT would provide connections for major activity center hubs along the corridor, Falls Church, Metrorail and West End Transitway in Alexandria, while reducing transit travel time by 50%.

Mr. Fye explained the Envision Route 7 project is entering Phase IV – Mobility Study which will begin in fall 2021. There will be more information to be provided at the May commission with a request for action at the June commission. DRPT funds have been allocated to continue the work on Phase IV, which includes an RFP for commission approval to advertise through summer 2021 and return to commission for approval of the contract in fall 2021.

Ms. Mattice added that Envision Route 7 is a regional project effort and engagement with regional representatives is ongoing; as well as staff closely monitoring the federal space for potential infrastructure funding avenues to support environmental and design work as well as SMART SCALE funding for construction of this high-capacity transit project to serve the region.

Mr. Fye provided an overview of the Options for Zero-Fare and Reduced-Fare Transit in Northern Virginia white paper. During various commission and committee meetings questions have been posed regarding reduced-fare or zero-fare programs. During the 2020 transportation trust fund realignment, the General Assembly created the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) to provide seed funding for zero- and reduced-fare programs. NVTC staff is preparing a white paper to provide information on the continuum of options, policy implications, cost implications and operational trade-offs.

NVTC staff will provide a briefing on the white paper at the July commission meeting. Mr. Meyer added that City of Fairfax CUE service has been fare-free since the beginning of the health emergency and that a recent presentation to the Fairfax City Council provided an overview of the financial and social equity motivations associated with keeping the CUE bus fare-free.

Ms. Garvey asked if the white paper will examine other examples of fare-free service; Mr. Fye stated it will and provide the lessons learned and trade-offs associated with a similar program.

Mr. Turner stated the “new-normal” is unpredictable and for this reason a bold marketing program with free fares could provide for positive long-term outcome of ridership recovery and ability to measure the elasticity of the demand curve for mass transit in the region.

Chair Snyder added an analysis of the financial structuring of the transit system, how much paid by government and the commuter, needs to also be considered. Closing remarks included a timeline for the next steps on the Commuter Choice (I-66) Round Four supplemental program and policy refinements in late August or September.

The Program Advisory Committee Meeting adjourned at 2:37 p.m.