



Maryland's statewide freight plan called ambitious, politically serious

September 17 2009 No Comments

This week, Maryland became the first state to craft a formalized, statewide strategy on the future of freight transportation. The ambitious plan illustrates the difficult nature of freight policy, but it also sets the bar for other states to follow, says one industry expert.

Governor Martin O'Malley and Transportation Secretary Beverley K. Swaim-Staley joined other state and federal transportation leaders to unveil Maryland's Statewide Freight Plan. The Freight Plan prioritizes more than 100 port, highway and rail projects to help support the expected 75 percent increase in freight shipments across the state. The projects, totaling about \$35 billion, are based on specific criteria ranging from safety and security to freight connectivity.

"This Plan shows how economic development and quality of life can coexist," Gov. O'Malley said in a statement. "Freight activity is present in every component of our transportation network, from the Port of Baltimore and Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport, to our highways, toll facilities and rail lines."

While Maryland's transportation infrastructure accommodates current demand reasonably well, the report says, future population and economic growth will outpace capacity. By 2030, 1.2 billion total tons of freight, valued at \$959.2 billion, will be shipped around Maryland's highways, seaports and waterways. It is an expected increase of 122 percent over 2003 value. The Statewide Freight Plan was built after many months of working with state, local and federal stakeholders, and developed in support of Maryland's Smart, Green and Growing Initiative. The Initiative seeks to restore and revitalize the Chesapeake Bay area by creating green jobs, improve transit and conserving energy.

"The Maryland plan has a level of completeness that is important," says Leo Penne, Freight Program Director for the American Association of Highway & Transportation Officials (AASHTO). "MDOT may well be the most comprehensive departments of state transportation. It includes highway, aviation, rail – freight and passenger – and water transportation. When it speaks about the various modes of freight, it can speak with

more authority than many states.”

The Statewide Freight Plan is over 130 pages, complete with 68 tables and figures, covering a range of subjects including waterways, marine terminals, freight industry trends, and freight's relationship to climate change. “Sometimes policy documents like Maryland's is more the product of mid-level staff. It may be well done and have some influence, but you can tell this plan is politically serious, which is important,” Penne said.

Despite the overwhelming scope of the document, one of the more impressive aspects of Maryland's Statewide Freight Plan is the broad cross-section of stakeholders organized to give input. Although the planning effort was spearheaded by the Transportation Secretary's Office, the Office of Planning and Capital Programming, and the Office of Freight Logistics, other Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) agencies participated in the effort through their membership on the Interagency Advisory Committee (IAC). And representatives of the private freight community participated through the Freight Stakeholder Advisory Committee (FSAC). Regional freight workshops were also held throughout the state.

“Maryland has a very ambitious outreach effort and ongoing mechanisms for getting outside involvement,” Penne said. “Most freight transportation goes on outside of government, so it's important to build a relationship in private industry.”

Still, Maryland is but one state among many in a system connected many times over without regard to state border. The challenge for Maryland, and most other states, when it comes to freight policy is dealing with a patchwork system, according to Mr. Penne.

“Freight moves across boundaries,” Penne said. “Being able to address the whole system and make investments that have benefits beyond your state is important. But it's also hard to do because taxpayers aren't interested in paying for projects in other states.”

For Maryland and other states, one of the most important events on the horizon is the surface transportation bill's authorization, which is set to expire at the end of this month. Mr. Penne said Congress is going to extend the bill, but for how long and for how much is still up in the air.

In her letter introducing the Maryland's Statewide Freight Plan, Transportation Secretary Swaim-Staley, perhaps addressed those kinds of challenges, writing, “For our part, we will not stop here. We will continue to engage the public and stakeholders in the prioritization of projects, update our forecasts and project lists, and work to secure resources from a variety of sources to implement those projects that rise to the top.”