

ANNUAL PROJECT PRIORITIZATION PROCESS for FY'21

Rita Seto, TRORC, January 2019

Background

This is the 15th year for the VTrans project prioritization process – a collaborative effort between VTrans and the regional planning commissions. VTrans was required to do this work in order to meet Vermont legislative directives and internal agency initiatives. The reality was people demanded a better understanding of how projects were prioritized, developed, and eventually constructed. Prior to this prioritization process, it was unclear as to why and how projects could advance at greater rates of speed than other projects. We are constantly mindful of what more needs to be done to our transportation system, but much has been completed over the last 15 years. The prioritization process works well and it has substantially improved the transparency in project selection and development.

Ranking Process Explained

The State's ranking process is based on engineering factors such as sufficiency ratings, vehicle per mile impacts, cost-benefit ratios, and project development momentum. These are the types of data specific criteria that you would expect an Agency of Transportation (AOT) to consider when developing project rankings. Their factors constitute 80% of the total ranking process.

The regional planning commission's factors contribute 20% to this ranking process. This was born from the idea that not all public policies and priorities could be captured by engineering factors and that there is a greater community context beyond that road, bridge, or park-and-ride. Regions needed to use planning factors that expand what VTrans officials are not able to factor into their ranking process.

We identify relative project priority by sequence (1, 2, 3). We are required to rank all projects as identified in Vermont's transportation capital program. Projects in construction or under contract are excluded. The ranking are for all projects, across all categories. State legislation requires us to consider these criteria in project ranking: (1) Project impact on congestion and mobility conditions; (2) Availability, accessibility and usability of alternative routes; (3) Functional importance of the highway or bridge to the economy; (4) Functional importance of the highway or bridge in social and cultural life; and (5) Other criteria, as necessary.

A full project ranking process is an adequate method to extract regional priorities and to lend guidance on state-level program priorities. But at VTrans, bridges won't compete directly against signals or roads - bridges will be ranked against other bridges. However, because we rank all projects as one group; we are also prioritizing these transportation programs. For example, this region has typically had bridges and road preservation projects as its highest priorities. Using our project ranking, we are making consistent statements about which programs should receive higher priority. We have consistently advanced preservation over new capacity which is consistent with the philosophies of both the State Transportation Plan and the TRORC Regional Plan.

Regional ranking criteria

The first project ranking process was developed 15 years ago. It was based on the state's legislative directives and the TRORC Regional Plan. Every year since, the TRORC Transportation Advisory Committee has slightly modified the project ranking methodology to better fit particular regional planning and contemporary transportation planning priorities. The ranking process sheet is on the last page of this summary. A new criteria focusing on flood vulnerability / hazard mitigation was added after T.S. Irene to reflect proposed bridge replacement projects and whether that will reduce flood vulnerability and/or

provide hazard mitigation by improving the design through increasing bridge span or elevating the height of a structure.

As always, planning-level criteria involve subjective judgment. While a road's traffic volume can be defined with numerical specificity, planning criteria are not so easily defined. What is a bridge rehab versus replacement – how much has to be replaced be it guardrail, decks, abutments, or all of the above? How is magnitude of safety improvements defined – provide signage for 15,000 motorists or improve an at-grade crossing for 4 homes? The hope is that consistent and transparent reviews, however subjective, improve our engineering-centric prioritization process.

Critical need new project requests

The State continues to discourage new projects, but after much discussion the State has acknowledged there are some transportation project needs that might compel consideration. I have reviewed the VTrans criteria and process. While I am aware of a number of projects in the region that should be accepted into the capital plan as candidate projects, there are no projects that would appear to meet these “high hurdle” selection criteria. I would still appreciate getting feedback on any local priorities that should be considered and/or simply brought to the region's attention. If anyone is interested in the full VTrans text that discusses critical need new projects, please contact me for the most up-to-date copy.

Deleting projects

We still have projects that are in the capital plan that have few chances of ever being constructed. These are typically low-volume bridges that are more appropriately funded locally or through the state aid program. Currently there is no incentive for towns or the region to delete a project. But the status quo is no different than project deletion. For now, if there are any communities that would consider deleting projects I can work directly with them.

Capital Program Project Status

In order for VTrans to spend funds on a project it must be listed in the Transportation Capital Program. VTrans submits a Capital Program to the Legislature each year and the Legislature must approve the list in order for projects to advance. The Capital Program categorizes projects according to the following status:

Candidate – A project gets on the Candidate list after it has completed the planning process and has been accepted by TRORC and passed onto VTrans.

Development & Evaluation (D&E) – A project moves from the Candidate list to the Development & Evaluation list if preliminary plans are expected within 12 to 24 months.

Front-of-the-Book (FOB) – Front-of-the-Book projects are part of VTrans four-year program. A project moves from the Development & Evaluation list to Front-of-the-Book when it has completed preliminary plan development.

Town Highway Bridge Projects

An annual list of TRORC top regional Town Highway Bridge priorities are submitted to VTrans to be selected as a Candidate for that fiscal year. A project selected to be a Candidate will have a greater probability of being selected by VTrans to move forward to D&E phase. This Candidate list will be reset every year to reflect current priority projects.

Ranking sheet

The attached sheet shows a listing of all projects that need to be ranked this year.

TRORC Ranking Criteria – January 2019

| Criteria (max %) | Description/Discussion | Measurements |
|--|--|--|
| System Preservation 30% | Maintenance of existing infrastructure is the lead priority in the Regional Transportation Plan. More frequent and less costly investments yield the greatest possible cost/benefit ratio. | Maintenance/Rehab = 30 Replace/Reconstruct = 20 |
| Safety 30% | Project addresses existing or potentially hazardous situations. It excludes facility failure and is focused on existing conditions and where those conditions could be improved through project investment (e.g., new guardrail, alignment shift to remediate poor sight distance). This also includes a more infrequent situation where excessive traffic has reduced mobility and/or safety. | High = 30 Med = 25 Low = 15 |
| Energy efficiency and multi-modalism 10% | Project improves connections between different transportation modes or has the potential to support modes other than the single-occupant vehicle. Project results in a more energy efficient system. | High = 10 Med = 5 Low = 3 |
| Economic Development 10% | Project has a direct or indirect impact to the local, regional, or state economy. Impacts to the economy may come from being adjacent to or linking economic centers. | High = 10 Med = 5 Low = 3 |
| Social and Cultural Importance 10% | Project is important to the social and cultural life of communities. Project supports investment in existing settlement areas and promotes efficient land usage. Project is supported by Town and Regional Plan land use and transportation priorities. | High = 10 Med = 5 Low = 3 |
| Alternative Routes 5% | Project maintains or enhances local and regionally significant connections/linkages (e.g., US4 investments maintain the primary east-west transportation corridor in the region). | High = 5 Low = 3 |
| Flood Vulnerability/Hazard Mitigation 5% | Proposed bridge replacement projects that indicate reduction in flood vulnerability and/or provide hazard mitigation by improving the design through increasing bridge span or elevating the height of structure. | High = 5 Low = 3 |
| Miscellanea Up to 5% | Project possesses some local/regional impact not properly captured through other criterion (e.g., weight-listed bridge prevents public work vehicles from accessing town, highway project helps advance access management for adjacent businesses). Project has been on the capital program list for an excessive amount of time. Project cannot be funded with any other grant program. | |

*ADT is used to break project ranking ties.