We need a transportation spending overhaul

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Maryland's draft six-year Consolidated Transportation Program (CTP) issued in September reflects both a growing long-term deficit in funding transportation infrastructure and the recession's negative effects on the state transportation fund's revenue sources.

The $8.9 billion in planned spending between now and FY 2015 is $1.7 billion less than the Maryland Department of Transportation's pre-recession six-year budget. The economic downturn has had an enormous impact on major transportation revenue sources, including titling and registrations fees and gas taxes.

Funding is in place to complete all transportation projects now under construction, but the backlog of projects planned but not funded now exceeds $40 billion and is growing, according to state Transportation Secretary Beverley K. Swaim-Staley.

As daunting as revenue data for the state's Transportation Trust Fund may seem, the situation is further complicated by two other important factors — the effect that emerging environmental policies will have on transportation infrastructure costs, and the need to change the way that new transportation projects are planned and budgeted.

The new six-year transportation budget shows that transportation planners are trying their best to stretch limited funding by moving priority projects forward but, in their own words, "to a much lesser extent than expected." They are judiciously spreading depleted funding among highway, transit, port and airport projects.

Where's the construction money?

For instance, the transportation department's new budget allocates $134 million in planning and engineering funds to the Red Line and Purple Line light rail projects in Baltimore and the Maryland suburbs of Washington to finish both projects' preliminary engineering phases by FY 2013 and position them for federal funding.

But neither project has a single dollar allocated for construction. The $49 million budgeted in a previous six-year plan to begin construction of the Red Line has been deferred, as has construction funding for numerous other projects.

Similarly, the department is moving ahead on highway improvements to accommodate job growth related to federal Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC), but at a much slower pace than originally planned. The six-year plan includes $98 million for work on 12 key intersections around Aberdeen Proving Ground, Fort Meade and other BRAC-effected federal facilities.

But the total cost to improve all 12 intersections is estimated at $200 million. And needed BRAC-related improvements to five major roads near Fort Meade and Aberdeen Proving Grounds do not have any construction funds in the next six years.

Meanwhile, the draft plan allocates $115 million toward MARC growth and investment to expand commuter rail service. The plan includes new rail cars, station and rail infrastructure improvements, and additional parking. But most of the funding is not programmed until FY 2014 and 2015.

These are just a few examples of the growing funding challenges that underscore the need to significantly strengthen revenues to Maryland's Transportation Trust Fund.

Rising environmental costs

In addition to the challenge of closing a $40 billion backlog in unfunded transportation projects, even more money will be needed to address additional cost pressures related to an increasing focus on environmental preservation and sustainability.

These pressures will extend considerably beyond obvious environmental costs such as those related to the port, where more than $300 million is budgeted for identifying and constructing new dredge disposal sites.

Transportation officials note, for example, that increasing emphasis on Chesapeake Bay preservation will significantly impact what can be done with transit and other transportation projects, as those projects must incorporate more comprehensive and sophisticated design for storm water runoff.

Environmental policy adjustments being driven at the national and state levels will not make transportation projects less expensive. They will make them more expensive — all the more reason for stronger, more reliable transportation funding resources.

Finally, there is undoubtedly room for improvement in the process by which we plan and budget for new transportation infrastructure.

For instance, highway and transit projects in the state's six-year transportation program are, in essence, derived from wish lists from elected leaders in local jurisdictions — for which the state calculates the planning, engineering and construction costs, prioritizes the projects and budgets for them as funding becomes available.

The question remains as to how much regional coordination among jurisdictions occurs in this process. Some degree of regional teamwork related to transportation and growth planning now exists. Nevertheless, it's fair to say that such teamwork has not yet developed to the level needed to address our regional and state mobility needs.

We could all benefit by changing the transportation planning process from essentially a number-crunching exercise to a much more collaborative effort among Maryland's regions and counties.

Growing fiscal pressures demand that our local and state governments move away from a tactical frame of mind to a more strategic transportation planning and funding process.

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