Linking Conservation & Transportation Planning in the Kansas City Region: A Draft Action Plan

Introduction

Up to 22 percent of Kansas City's undeveloped land area retains vegetative communities worthy of conservation, such as mature deciduous forests, lowland hardwood forests, marshes and other wetlands, grasslands and savannas - all reminiscent of the dominant natural features of the region 150 years ago. As the region continues to grow and expand, Kansas Citians will have to make deliberate decisions, through development patterns and roadway design, to conserve and restore natural amenities for a continued quality of life. A framework for better integration of environmental and transportation planning at the state, regional, and local levels would provide clear direction for ensuring consideration of natural amenities at all stages in the planning process.

Local officials, transportation planners, and conservation experts participated in a "Linking Conservation and Transportation Planning" Workshop on February 21 - 22, 2008 to help frame transportation priorities in the context of natural resource conservation and other community priorities. A draft action plan emerged from the two-day workshop. This draft plan identifies possible policy and process modifications that help link conservation and transportation planning. Boxed items are short-term action items which can be considered first for implementation.

Themes

Three major themes emerged throughout the two-day workshop:

- Create a process framework that integrates ecological, economic and social factors in both conservation and transportation planning.

- Invest in sustainable transportation and green infrastructure systems that create amenities and improve the quality of life for the region's residents.

- Build and strengthen collaborative partnerships and public support.

Short-term Implementation

The following 10 items have been initially identified by MARC staff for short-term implementation:

1. Include specific environmental goals and policies in the regional long-range transportation plan (LRTP) to meet the goal of becoming "America's Green Region". *(Item A3)*
2. Develop formal conservation and environmental criteria for regional transportation improvement program (TIP) project evaluation and programming. *(Item A5)*
3. Revise project evaluation/selection and programming processes so that they are more holistic. *(Item B1)*
4. Review structure and composition of MARC committees to ensure proper mix of committees and members. *(Item B2)*
5. Convene interdisciplinary teams with expertise in each area to advise/inform others on relationships and impacts. *(Item B3)*
6. Review visions and comprehensive plans of local municipalities and counties to identify themes for community priorities. *(Item B4)*
7. Develop a set of regional principles and strategies. *(Item C1)*
8. Engage the public across the region at key points in the decision-making process, especially at the beginning of the process. *(Item D1)*
9. Incorporate environmental, social and economic data earlier in the transportation planning process. *(Item E1)*
10. Ensure that key agencies and stakeholders are present throughout the decision-making process.

As an LRTP update will commence this year and the TIP is slated to be updated next year, these processes provide opportunities for incorporation of several short-term action items. Specifically, project evaluation and programming processes, committee structure and composition, compilation of data and tools, and engagement of the public and key stakeholders can be addressed with these plan updates.

Regarding short-term action items #6 and #7, it is important to note that MARC staff is currently in the process of evaluating the need for an internal visioning process. This process would be based on the goals of existing communities and would result in a set of principles on which to base all of MARC's work. Assuming this process moves forward, these principles would also be utilized to achieve better integration of conservation and transportation planning. While workshop participants recommended conducting a broader regional visioning process to obtain better integration, it is likely that visioning will initially be conducted on an internal scale, with the possibility of developing a larger, external regional vision in the future.

Workshop Participant Recommendations

A. Modify planning processes and plans to create a more sustainable transportation system.

Transportation planning processes should be evaluated at the state, local, and regional scales for better incorporation of environmental considerations.

A.1 Revise the **state long-range transportation plan** to include an environmental policy and conservation strategies.

A.2 Incorporate environmental considerations into the planning process prior to the development of the **state transportation improvement program**.

- Identify environmentally sensitive areas and projects that either avoid or minimize impacts.
- Conduct a preliminary environmental prioritization exercise.

A.3 Include specific environmental goals and policies in the **regional long-range transportation plan (LRTP)** to meet the goal of becoming "America's Green Region".

A.4 Expand **regional special studies** to include natural resource studies.

- Provide more studies that would inform decision-making.
- Develop guidelines for incorporation of environmental considerations into the study process.

A.5 Develop formal conservation and environmental criteria for **regional transportation improvement program** project evaluation and programming.

- Issue memorandums of understanding for proper environmental mitigation and create incentives for integrated planning efforts.
- If ecological resources cannot be avoided or minimized, direct compensatory mitigation dollars to prioritized ecological areas.

A.6 Include natural resource and environmental considerations in **long-range plans of local jurisdictions**.

- Provide local municipalities with data needed for proper integration.
- Evaluate regional implications of new sewer district projects.

Lead Agency: Varies, depending on which action item is being considered. Responsible agencies and partners include MARC, KDOT, MoDOT, local municipalities, transit agencies, and resource agencies.

Timeframe for Implementation: Varies, depending on which action item is being considered. Action items that can be considered in the short term include incorporation of environmental considerations into KDOT's long-range transportation plan, the regional long-range plan, and the transportation improvement program.

B. Make decisions based on ecological opportunities, transportation goals, and community priorities.

Decision-making with multiple objectives in mind would lead to implementation of projects with better integration.

B.1	Revise project evaluation/selection and programming processes so that they are more holistic.

- Consider the following process changes:
  - Allocate funds to projects with fewer negative environmental impacts.
  - Provide more funds to transit and bicycle/ pedestrian options.
  - Select high priority conservation areas to focus funding for mitigation, including avoidance.

B.2	Review structure and composition of MARC committees to ensure proper mix of committees and members.

B.3	Convene interdisciplinary teams with expertise in each area to advise/inform others on relationships and impacts.

B.4	Review visions and comprehensive plans of local municipalities and counties to identify themes for community priorities.

B.5 Assemble natural heritage and environmental data needed to make the most informed decisions.

- MetroGreen
- Natural Resources Inventory
- Paint the Town
- Air Quality Action Plan
- State Wildlife Action Plans

Lead Agency: MARC, in conjunction with DOTs, local municipalities and resource agencies.

Timeframe for Implementation: Short to intermediate term.

C. Create a regional vision.

A regional vision would provide a framework for more holistic planning, as it would include all aspects of a community, including infrastructure, natural features, and other land uses.

C.1	Develop a set of regional principles and strategies.

C2 Frame visioning process within the context of creating "America's Green Region".

C.3 Educate stakeholders on the advantages of integrated planning processes.

- Develop best management practices for integrated planning in the context of eco-regions, new development, and redevelopment.
- Develop a development/redevelopment tool kit (excise taxes, impact fees) for both sides of the state line to manage impacts/mitigation.

C.4 Utilize the regional vision to drive decision-making.

C.5 Prioritize plans and projects within the context of a regional vision and policy framework.

C.6 Ensure buy-in to the vision and implementation through local and regional plans and ordinances.

C.7 Invest in implementation of vision.

C.8 Create clear indicators to gauge successes/failures of implementation.

C.9 The vision should include the following considerations:

- Linkage of transportation planning to not only natural resources and the environment, but also to land use, cultural, historic, and agricultural elements.
- Land, water and air quality.
- Enhancement of the quality of built and natural environments.
- Expansion of balanced multi-modal options.
- Promotion of land use policies that provide a critical density of development for transit-oriented design, a connected system of bicycle facilities, roadway connectivity, and walkable streets.
- Alternative and clean energy sources.

Lead Agency: MARC, in partnership with local municipalities, DOTs, transit agencies, and resource agencies.

Timeframe for Implementation: Long term.

D. Engage the public in a more meaningful way to improve community quality of life.

Public engagement methods need to be evaluated to ensure that the public is being engaged in a meaningful manner.

D.1	Engage the public across the region at key points in the decision-making process, especially at the beginning of the process.

D.2 Use visualization tools to more effectively engage the public.

D.3 Ask the public what they value and how they view the future of the community.

D.4 Use collaboration and consensus building in the engagement processes.

D.5 Educate the general public on the advantages of integrated planning processes via public forums and guest lectures. Show the public successful local integrated planning efforts.

Lead Agency: MARC and local municipalities.

Timeframe for Implementation: Varies, depending on when plans are updated.

E. Improve data collection and data sharing.

Improved data collection and sharing will streamline the data collection process, reduce project costs, and assist decision-makers in making more informed decisions.

E.1	Incorporate environmental, social and economic data earlier in the transportation planning process.

- Compile environmental, historic, cultural, social, and other pertinent data prior to development of the long-range plan and utilize throughout the planning process and in project development.
- Utilize data to help define the problem and conceptualize solutions.

- Ensure that data is presented in a manner that provides clarity on how a transportation project will affect the region's natural resources and society.

E.2 Develop a formal process for collecting, sharing, and updating data.
- Create a data team with representatives from all agencies.
- Bring ecological data holders to the table. Think holistically.
- Hold GIS coordination meetings and summits.

E.3 Conduct a data needs assessment.
- Identify potential ecological restoration sites.
- Add floodplain by soil type to conservation maps and prioritize areas to conserve.
- Locate airports and evaluate linkage between air travel and surface transportation.

E.4 Explore additional funding sources for data collection and analysis.

E.5 Be aware of data sensitivity and ownership. Use data at planning level with use and display agreement.

E.6 Interconnect high level and local level data.
- Identify common data standards.
- Open data sharing agreements.

E.7 Make data more available for local-level planning projects.
- Ensure that local policies and strategies are supportive of utilizing data to achieve integrated planning.

E.8 Develop tools to represent data.
- Make tools user-friendly and available to the general public.
- Turn data into clear information via value sets.

E.9 Create Version 2.0 of the regional Natural Resources Inventory, resulting in a more localized version of the inventory data.

Lead Agency: MARC, DOTs, and local municipalities, in conjunction with natural heritage programs.

Timeframe for Implementation: Short to intermediate term.

F. Build stronger relationships to achieve an interdisciplinary approach to planning and implementation.

To link conservation and transportation planning, interdisciplinary and cross-agency discussions are needed.

F.1 Ensure that key agencies and stakeholders are present throughout the decision-making process.

F.2 Use common data and tools to show options for future scenarios to better inform conservation and transportation planning.

F.3 Educate public officials and decision-makers about the significance of linking conservation and transportation planning.

Lead Agency: MARC, DOTs, and local municipalities, in conjunction with resource agencies.

Timeframe for Implementation: Short to intermediate term.