

STAFF REPORT

Date: March 18, 2020

To: TRPA Regional Plan Implementation Committee

From: TRPA Staff

Subject: VMT Threshold Update

Summary and Staff Recommendation:

The approved Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) threshold update workplan is intended to update the standard established in 1982 for air quality concerns to reflect the salient concerns of today including regional mobility and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The workplan is in its seventh month of implementation. Based on the experience to date and the application of the adaptive management process, staff seeks direction to propose updating the VMT threshold standard from a target based on air quality to a target that addresses concerns related to mobility, mobile source GHG emissions, and other identified concerns associated with vehicle travel.

Required Motion:

In order to recommend approval of the requested action, the Regional Plan Implementation Committee should make the following motion based on the staff summary:

- 1) A motion to direct staff to revise the VMT threshold update workplan, to propose updating the VMT threshold standard from a target based on air quality to a threshold that address concerns related to mobility, mobile source GHG emissions, and other identified concerns associated with vehicle travel (e.g., the promotion of compact development in town centers, reduced reliance on the private automobile, etc.), thus defining the level of regional VMT and VMT reductions that TRPA is then committed to managing and planning for at both the regional and project level.

Background:

The current VMT threshold standard established a goal of reducing NO_x emission by 10% from 1981 levels, as measured by VMT. It was established in 1982 to improve water quality by reducing nitrogen deposition from in-basin mobile sources (e.g., emissions from cars and trucks). Nitrogen emissions from mobile sources in the Region have declined more than 66% since the standard was adopted, far in exceedance of the goal for that standard. Regional NO_x emissions have been steadily decreasing since 1989 and reductions far exceed the 10% reduction initially envisioned by the standard.

The RPIC directed staff to update the VMT threshold standard to reflect current concerns. Given that NO_x emissions were no longer the motivating concern, the update process began with the identification of two focus areas around which to orient the workplan; 1) promoting regional mobility and providing options to automobile travel, and 2) reducing mobile source greenhouse gas emissions. Achieving those

goals requires updating and aligning the complementary implementing mechanisms in the Regional Plan and Regional Transportation Plan (RTP).

California Senate Bill 743 modified CEQA requirements replacing project impact on Level of Service (LOS) with project impact on VMT as the core component of the analysis. The shift is consistent with a larger shift away from LOS. To implement best practices in transportation and regional planning and ensure regional alignment of project analysis requirements, staff is working on a project level VMT analysis tool with jurisdictions on the California side of the basin. While state policy has only recently started to focus on VMT, TRPA has focused on VMT reduction for more than forty years. The Regional Plan and Regional Transportation Plan work in concert to promote walkable, bikeable, and transit friendly communities that reduce VMT.

At the December RPIC meeting, staff presented a high-level overview of that system and reaffirmed the agency's commitment to managing VMT. To achieve the goals of the Regional Plan and ensure alignment with State policy, staff stated that VMT will continue to play a central role in project evaluation as an action-forcing mechanism to encourage better project design. The ongoing work and commitment to integrate VMT at the project level is complemented by the significant investments currently being made to update TRPA's regional travel demand model. That work will enable more accurate estimation and forecasting of regional VMT.

The additional investments in the travel demand model and the use of VMT as the primary metric for project evaluation have led staff to recommend a proposal to use VMT to establish a new threshold for reducing both the dependence on the automobile and mobile source GHG. The proposal would update the existing VMT threshold from one rooted in concerns over NOx emissions that have already been achieved, to one that reflects our communities' shared aspirations for its transportation system and development pattern. Upon completion of the TRPA model update and verification that the model is appropriately sensitive to VMT effects, TRPA can forecast the anticipated level of VMT growth associated with planned development as set forth in the Regional Plan and Regional Transportation Plan and can determine whether that level of VMT is appropriate given the revised VMT threshold and the various concerns related to vehicle use in the basin. The VMT threshold would inform further regional planning processes as well as project-level standards for VMT reductions necessary to achieve the regional threshold.

If the RPIC recommends moving forward with the proposed workplan modifications, staff will revise the workplan accordingly and bring the revised workplan back to RPIC. Staff will provide RPIC with an update on the project analysis framework work currently underway with partner jurisdictions on the California side of the Region at its April meeting. The update of the project level analysis framework will ground discussion of future goals in a common set of expectations of both the impacts and contributions of individual projects to regional mobility goals.

Contact Information:

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