



TPO Board Meeting

Marion County Commission Auditorium
601 SE 25th Avenue, Ocala, FL 34471
March 25, 2025
3:00 PM

MINUTES

Members Present:

Councilmember Ire Bethea, Sr.
Commissioner Craig Curry
Councilmember Kristen Dreyer
Commissioner Ray Dwyer
Councilmember James Hilty
Councilman Tim Inskeep
Councilmember Barry Mansfield
Mayor Ben Marciano
Commissioner Matt McClain
Commissioner Michelle Stone
Commissioner Carl Zalak

Members Not Present:

Others Present:

Rob Balmes, TPO
Shakayla Irby, TPO
Liz Mitchell, TPO
Kia Powell, FDOT
Jon Scarfe, FDOT
Tom Duncan, City of Ocala
Darren Park, City of Ocala
Steven Buck, FDOT
Kellie Smith, FDOT
Eric Smith, City of Ocala
Noel Cooper, City of Ocala
Nathan Gallops, Ocala Police Department
Barb Gutman
Other members of the public not signed in.

Item 1. Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance

Chairman Carl Zalak called the meeting to order at 3:02pm and led the board in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Item 2. Roll Call

Secretary Shakayla Irby called the roll and a quorum was present.

Item 3. Proof of Publication

Secretary Shakayla Irby stated the meeting had been published online to the TPO's website, as well as the City of Ocala, Belleview, Marion County, and Dunnellon's websites on March 18, 2025. The meeting had also been published to the TPOs Facebook and Twitter pages.

Item 4. Consent Agenda

Ms. Dreyer made a motion to approve the Consent Agenda. Mr. Curry seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Item 5A. 2024 Annual Joint Certification with the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT)

Annually, the FDOT and the TPO must perform a joint review of the certification status for the transportation planning process. The 2024 joint certification process was conducted from January to February 2025, including a virtual meeting with FDOT District 5 Liaison team members on February 4.

FDOT District 5 Liaison, Kia Powell, briefly provided a highlight of the 2024 certification process at the meeting on March 25.

Ms. Powell explained that the certification process was divided into two parts: one conducted by the MPO, which included plans, policy data collection, and cooperative efforts, and the other by the District, which involved evaluating invoices, procurement, and planning documents. If any elements did not meet statutory requirements, the District could issue recommendations or corrective actions. The review began in January, with the final certification due by June 1st each year.

Ms. Powell announced that the TPO received a 100% score for 2024 and thanked the Ocala Marion TPO team for their efforts.

Mr. McClain made a motion to approve the 2024 Annual Joint Certification with the FDOT. Mr. Marciano seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Item 5B. List of Priority Projects (LOPP) Policies and Procedures Update

Rob Balmes, TPO Director, stated that Marion County requested the removal of the Top 20 project list from the List of Priority Projects (LOPP) during the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) meeting on January 14. This change would require Board approval to revise the current LOPP Policies and Procedures guidance document.

The proposed removal was discussed as an action item at the March 11, 2025 TAC meeting, but no recommendations were made by the committee. FDOT had no recommendations regarding the TPO's preferences for the annual LOPP lists or project categories.

Mr. Marciano inquired why Marion County wanted to eliminate the Top 20 project list.

Chairman Zalak explained that the list was originally developed under a previous FDOT Secretary to consolidate priorities. However, the County Engineer had expressed that the list was no longer effective, since FDOT now allocates funding through specific categories or "buckets." He noted that the TPO already prioritizes projects within each funding category, making the consolidated list redundant.

Ms. Kellie Smith, FDOT District 5 Planning & Environmental Management Administrator, provided background on the list's origins, stating it was created during a time of more restrictive funding to help identify MPOs' core priorities. She noted that the Ocala, Sumter, and Lake-Sumter MPOs participated, with Lake-Sumter continuing to use the list because it aligned with the preferences of a former FDOT Secretary. While the list format had been helpful for federal grant applications, she clarified that projects could still be prioritized through other means. The use of a Top 20 list was ultimately up to each MPO Board. FDOT continues to coordinate with staff like TPO Director Mr. Balmes to understand priorities and leverage funding sources, such as SunTrail.

Ms. Stone added that while there is still a system for prioritization, different types of projects—such as roadways and trails—are now categorized separately. She emphasized that combining all project types into one Top 20 list is no longer necessary and could actually disadvantage certain projects by causing them to be overlooked. She also noted that only one other MPO in Florida still maintains a Top 20 list, and it is no longer an FDOT requirement.

Mr. Marciano expressed concern that removing the list might negatively impact city projects and questioned how the city's interests would be protected.

Ms. Stone reassured him that city projects would continue to appear on priority lists, just categorized by type. For example, city roadway projects would be listed along with other roadway projects from across jurisdictions. She emphasized that under a consolidated list, city projects could be overshadowed by unrelated project types like trails, and reiterated that the Top 20 format was no longer essential.

Board members engaged in an in-depth discussion regarding the usefulness and structure of the Top 20 Priority List compared to separate category-based project lists (e.g., trails, safety, roads). The conversation reflected differing perspectives on whether maintaining a consolidated Top 20 list still served the TPO's goals effectively.

Ms. Smith clarified that while she was hesitant to provide a specific opinion, she noted that Florida's three major MPOs—Space Coast (Brevard County), River to Sea (Volusia and Flagler counties), and MetroPlan Orlando—had adopted a multiple-list approach. This structure allows each MPO to identify several top priorities across different categories, essentially giving them “multiple number ones.”

She explained that these MPOs maintain separate lists for various funding programs, such as trails, local agency programs, and state highway programs. This format allows each priority to be clearly identified within its respective category, rather than being consolidated into a single Top 20 list.

Ms. Smith added that when FDOT or MPOs apply for grants, one of the key questions is: "What is your priority number?" The answer depends on the type of project. For example, if the application is for a trail, the top item on the trail list would be used. If it's a safety-related project, the top item on the safety list would be referenced. She emphasized that clear communication between the TPO and FDOT is ultimately the most critical factor in ensuring priorities are understood and funded appropriately.

Ms. Dreyer acknowledged that she had gone back and forth on the issue, recognizing both the advantages and disadvantages of maintaining the Top 20 list. She noted that the TPO already provided the additional lists being discussed, including the Top 20 as well as separate lists by project type.

She expressed concern that removing the Top 20 list might disadvantage smaller municipalities. While the Top 20 list might not feature multiple trail projects, cities like Dunnellon or Belleview could include a project that—if the list were broken out by category—might fall far below other priorities. In that sense, the Top 20 list could help elevate projects from smaller cities and give them a better chance at potential funding.

She then directed a question to Mr. Balmes, asking whether the TPO had received funding for projects listed outside of the Top 20 list in previous years, specifically from the additional lists.

Mr. Balmes confirmed that projects outside of the Top 20 list had received funding in recent years. He addressed Ms. Dreyer's question by noting that he had been tracking the lists closely, particularly over the past three years since the TPO began using seven separate lists in addition to the Top 20.

He explained that the 48th Street Interchange had remained the number one priority for about a decade and continued to appear on the Top 20 list. However, in 2023, the Santos-to-Baseline Trail project was funded through the SUN Trail program, even though it was number six on the trails list and not included in the Top 20. That project had been ready for some time and was simply awaiting available funding.

In the most recent funding cycle, the Belleview Greenway Trail project was funded while it was ranked 17th on the Top 20 list. Mr. Balmes added that the only significant instance of projects being funded well outside the Top 20 occurred in 2021, when FDOT District 5, under newly appointed Secretary Perdue, requested a comprehensive list of all available projects. As a result, the Emerald Road project (ranked number nine) and the 8th Avenue roundabouts (ranked number 31) received funding.

Overall, Mr. Balmes emphasized that while a few projects outside of the Top 20 had been funded, the majority of funded projects had generally fallen within the Top 20 range. He noted that project funding had been limited in recent years due to ongoing funding challenges.

Ms. Dreyer observed that, based on the examples Mr. Balmes provided, the majority of funded projects had been included on the Top 20 list, with the exception of the SUN Trail project. She emphasized that this demonstrated the continued relevance of the list.

She also referenced the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) meeting, noting that the proposal to eliminate the Top 20 list failed due to a lack of a second, which she believed spoke volumes. Her staff had attended that meeting and, following internal discussions, they did not see a need to eliminate the Top 20 list.

Ms. Dreyer emphasized that the list was a product of collaboration among jurisdictions and supported communication—a key theme from the previous Board meeting. She concluded that the Top 20 list remained a valuable tool for facilitating that communication and coordination.

Mr. Steven Cohoon, County Engineer, stated that he appreciated the debate and believed it was an important discussion to have. He explained that, from a TPO perspective, Marion County is somewhat inconsistent with how other areas in Florida approach project prioritization. After conducting research, he noted that of the five MPOs in FDOT District 5, Marion is one of only two still using the Top 20 format. The others have reached a census threshold that allows them to receive funding allocations differently than Marion or Sumter MPO.

He stated that as Marion County grows, funding will eventually be allocated directly to the TPO, and at that point, having clear, categorized priority lists will become even more important. These allocations will be tied to specific funding categories—such as trails or SunTrail—not to a general Top 20 list. Therefore, he felt it was important to prepare now for that shift.

He also expressed that ranking projects by individual categories allows for more productive debate and focused decision-making. For example, discussions about trail projects are more effective when only trail projects are considered.

Lastly, he noted that focusing too heavily on the Top 20 list could cause the Board to lose sight of those broader goals. He felt that more attention should be paid to aligning local priorities with FDOT's, to benefit all jurisdictions—whether Ocala, Dunnellon, or unincorporated areas. In his experience, such conversations would be more productive without the constraints of a single Top 20 list.

Ms. Bryant sought clarification, asking if eliminating the Top 20 list would still allow for maintaining separate priority lists—such as for trails or roads.

Mr. Cohoon confirmed that under this approach, each municipality and the county would still have the opportunity to propose their priorities, and the Board would place those projects on the appropriate lists.

Mr. Bethea expressed that the current process already established clear priorities, including a Top 20 list along with other categorized lists. He emphasized that priorities could and did shift as needed, and the TPO adjusted accordingly.

He questioned the need for changing the system, noting that the TPO provided FDOT with necessary guidance and that the time spent prioritizing projects was not wasted.

Jeff Shrum, Growth Management Director for the City of Ocala, clarified that there was no indication from FDOT that using a Top 20 list was wrong. The matter had been raised at a previous TAC meeting, and FDOT staff confirmed that while not all MPOs use such a list, there was nothing inherently incorrect about doing so. FDOT also indicated they could work with a Top 20 list if provided. Mr. Shrum emphasized that the City was seeking clear justification for changing the current approach and did not view doing things differently from others as a sufficient reason to alter the system.

The board discussed the potential elimination of the Top 20 priority list in favor of focusing on individual category-based lists (e.g., trails, roads) to better align with FDOT funding buckets. It was noted that listing projects by type and ranking them within their specific category would simplify identifying top priorities and clarify communication with FDOT. Some members expressed concern that a consolidated list may send mixed messages about project importance. Others emphasized that the existing categorized lists already support prioritization and project adjustments as needed. While some felt the Top 20 list added unnecessary redundancy and complexity, others viewed it as a valuable tool for regional prioritization and historical context.

A suggestion by Mr. Marciano was made to send the matter back to the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) for further review before making a final decision. The group acknowledged the importance of maintaining clear communication and cooperation across jurisdictions regardless of list format.

Mr. Marciano made a motion to send the LOPP Policies and Procedures back to the Technical Advisory Committees for further review and discussion. Mr. McClain seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Item 6A. SunTran Annual Report to TPO Board

Tom Duncan, Transit Administrator for the City of Ocala, presented an update on the SunTran Transit Development Plan. The update covered recent improvements, funding progress, and strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing sustainability, service accessibility, and alignment with state transportation authorities.

Mr. Duncan discussed changes to the Transit Development Plan regulations, including extended deadlines for project reporting and the new requirement for performance benchmarking against peer transit systems to boost operational efficiency and competitiveness. Sustainability and equity remain central priorities, with Florida now requiring documentation of low-emission initiatives and expanded reporting on accessibility for underserved populations.

The annual update highlighted continued ridership growth, improved service efficiency, and major infrastructure projects, such as renovations to transit facilities and bus shelter upgrades. Significant improvements were noted in ridership and on-time performance, and SunTran's cost per passenger trip remains lower than the average of comparable agencies.

Operational enhancements included software upgrades for route optimization, real-time tracking tools, and enhanced driver training programs.

Financially, SunTran secured major federal and state grants to support the purchase of electric buses, maintenance facility upgrades, and downtown circulator operations.

Future plans included completing downtown transit station renovations, adding new bus shelters with ADA-compliant access, and launching a downtown circulator service featuring a trolley. SunTran remains committed to expanding electric bus services and introducing microtransit options to reinforce sustainability goals.

Chairman Zalak raised a question regarding a noted change to the Silver Route and a statement that the County was "minimally favorable" to it; he stated he did not recall discussing the change. Staff clarified that most adjustments had been minor and time-based, with no major route changes made. The Silver Route had continued to traverse Northeast Jacksonville Road, although minor deviations had been made to remain on more primary roads.

Chairman Zalak also suggested the potential for future weekend transit service between downtown Ocala and the World Equestrian Center (WEC).

Ms. Dreyer confirmed that such service was under consideration but would require approval from WEC due to property access concerns.

Additionally, Chairman Zalak asked a question regarding compliance with recent executive orders and their potential impacts on transit operations, including requirements around disadvantaged business enterprises (DBEs) and electric vehicle policies.

Mr. Duncan explained that they had followed FTA guidance and remained in compliance with funding requirements. The current direction from FTA had been to proceed with already committed programs and contracts unless new guidance was issued.

Item 6B. Active Transportation Plan Update

Mr. Balmes provided a detailed update on the TPO's active transportation plan, which served as an update to the 2035 bike and pedestrian plan focused on non-motorized transportation. The plan aimed to assess existing conditions, including safety, level of comfort, and accessibility to major trailheads, parks, downtown areas, and other community activity centers via sidewalks and trails.

He explained that the project was in the middle phase, with the consultant Kittelson and Associates conducting behind-the-scenes work. Presentations were planned to include findings on accessibility and safety levels, as well as economic, health, and social benefits of non-motorized transportation.

Public engagement had been a key component of the process. Outreach included social media efforts and on-site engagement at local fitness centers, which resulted in 158 survey responses and 67 additional comments—a strong response given the survey's exclusive focus on biking and walking. Mr. Balmes highlighted that the largest age group participating was 35 to 44 years old, and geographically, most responses came from the central area of Marion County, indicating a need to increase participation in other regions.

Survey participants identified recreational facilities, such as trails and parks, along with shopping and grocery locations, as the top land uses that needed better connectivity.

Walking and hiking were rated highly in terms of their positive contribution to quality of life, with exercise and recreation being the primary reasons people walked or hiked in the community.

Regarding improvements, respondents emphasized the need to address sidewalk gaps, enhance trails, and improve lighting. For biking, protected bike lanes, trails, and shared-use paths were the most requested improvements. Stakeholder engagement included collaboration with groups like Horse Farms Forever, which helped connect the project team with community members.

Mr. Balmes noted specific community concerns, such as safety issues along NE 25th Avenue due to road curvature and a lack of adequate facilities, as well as suggestions for widening the land bridge and support for rail trail development in Ocala.

He concluded by noting that the next steps included presenting draft priority project lists at the upcoming meeting, which would later be integrated into the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) and Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) processes. Mr. Balmes also mentioned the transition of project leadership from former planner Sara to himself to ensure continuity and progress.

Item 7. Comments by FDOT

Chairman Zalak expressed appreciation to the Governor for visiting Marion County to break ground on the I-75 project and thanked the Secretary for his contributions.

Ms. Kia Powell noted that the February construction report was included in the agenda.

She shared an update from the Safety Office, highlighting that FDOT District 5, which includes nine counties, experienced a 15% decrease in fatalities in 2024 compared to the previous year—translating to over 110 lives saved. She called this an encouraging reminder of the impact of collaborative safety efforts across Central Florida.

She invited members and community residents to Central Florida’s Inaugural Transportation Industry Hiring Event, scheduled for April 30 from 3–7 p.m. at Osceola Heritage Park. She noted that flyers were available and encouraged everyone to spread the word about job openings and opportunities to learn more about the transportation industry.

She also announced the Second Annual Central Florida Safety Summit, set for Friday, May 9 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Daytona International Speedway. She added that additional details would be shared soon and invited those interested to contact either Loreen Bobo or herself.

She pointed out that the latest issue of the District 5 Covet Points newsletter had been distributed and contained district-wide updates, news, and announcements of upcoming events.

Ms. Stone suggested that Chairman Zalak send a letter to Secretary Perdue on behalf of the TPO Board to acknowledge his leadership and recognize his award for “Man of the Year,” and Chairman Zalak agreed to do so.

Chairman Zalak asked for an update on State Road 200, noting that he had received many public inquiries and expressing interest in the most recent information available.

Ms. Powell responded that she would provide Chairman Zalak with the latest updates on State Road 200.

Mr. Kenneth Campbell addressed the Board regarding the CR 484 bridge project. He reported that the design phase had taken a long time, but redesign plans were expected that week. These plans would be shared with the contractor and subcontractors to obtain pricing and determine a project timeline. He stated that he hoped to provide updates by the next meeting.

Mr. Campbell explained that the original wall design—a soldier pile wall—had encountered constructability issues due to subsurface conditions. As a result, the wall required a redesign, along with additional testing, which had extended the project timeline.

Mr. Marciano inquired about the status of the U.S. 441 and SR 40 intersection.

Mr. Campbell replied that although a meeting had taken place, no updated design plans had been received. The next phase was anticipated around June or July, though it remained unclear whether that would involve finalizing the design or beginning construction.

Mr. Campbell noted that internal staffing changes within the traffic operations department could impact communication and project timelines. He stated that he planned to follow up with the department's new personnel.

He also assured the Board that discussions had occurred with the design team to prevent similar traffic setup issues along Maricamp Road.

Mr. Marciano acknowledged that the Ocala Police Department was having difficulty navigating traffic at certain times of the day and emphasized the urgency of resolving the issue to support emergency response and public safety.

Item 8. Comments by TPO Staff

Mr. Balmes informed the Board that a schedule for the 2050 Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) had been included in their meeting packets. He stated that over the next few meetings, members would be presented with needs projects, growth scenarios, and revenue updates. He emphasized the importance of gathering Board feedback and support for the development of project lists. A cost feasible list was expected to be ready in August, with a draft presented for public hearing in September, and final adoption anticipated in November.

He reported that a successful open house workshop was held on February 25th and expressed appreciation to Mayor Marciano and Councilmember Bethea for attending and helping to generate public feedback. Mr. Balmes also noted that a public survey was currently open through March 31st to gather additional community input on priority needs.

At the May Board meeting, staff planned to present a draft of the FY 2026–2030 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) along with the corresponding priority project list.

While the schedule might shift slightly due to review of the Top 20 List, the TPO was still required to submit its list of priority projects to FDOT by July 1st. He indicated that staff would work with the Technical Advisory Committee at the next meeting to review both the draft list and the seven-year list to prepare a recommendation for the Board's consideration.

Mr. Balmes reminded the Board of upcoming meetings: The Central Florida MPO Alliance was scheduled to meet on April 11th in Orlando, and the quarterly MPO Advisory Council (MPOAC) meeting was set for April 24th in Tallahassee.

He then highlighted legislative developments, stating that Senate Bill 462 and House Bill 567 contained strike-through language that again proposed eliminating the MPOAC, similar to a legislative attempt made the previous year. He would continue to monitor both bills and would provide the board with updates.

Mr. Balmes also relayed that the FDOT's Office of Policy Planning had notified MPO directors statewide of anticipated adjustments to the FDOT Work Program. These adjustments were due to Governor DeSantis' recent decision to return \$878 million in federal funds, which included carbon reduction funding allocated to various projects across the state. The District would provide further information as it became available.

Lastly, Mr. Balmes provided an update on the Safety Matters video series. He noted that five Board members had already participated, while seven had not. He encouraged participation, as the goal was to include all 12 members. Upcoming video topics included Motorcycle Safety (with Chairman Zalak and Councilmember Mansfield), Distracted Driving (Commissioner McClain and Vice Mayor Inskeep), Seat Belt Use (Commissioner Curry and Councilmember Hilty, along with a high school student), and the Move Over Law (Councilmember Bethea, City and County Fire Chiefs, and Captain Lamont from FHP). He mentioned that the Marion County Public Information Office would be reaching out to coordinate video shoots.

Item 9. Comments by TPO Board Members

Mr. Dwyer stated that Mr. Chamberlain had introduced a bill proposing stiffer penalties for fleeing and eluding charges. He expressed hope that the legislation would pass and believed it could significantly reduce such incidents.

Item 10. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Item 11. Adjournment

Chairman Zalak adjourned the meeting at 4:05 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted By:

Shakayla Irby, Administrative Assistant