

SUMMARY OF THE AASHTO BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND TRANSPORTATION POLICY FORUM JOINT WEBINAR ON COVID-19

Friday, March 20, 2020 / 3-4:15pm EDT

AASHTO President Patrick McKenna appreciates what those on the call and their states are going through, in continuing to provide services while balancing that against the safety needs of employees/others interfaced with. He believes it is beneficial for states to understand what each others' issues are, harmonize where possible, and utilize the team at AASHTO in bringing a consistent and unified message to the Hill, modal administrators, USDOT, etc.

HIGHLIGHTS OF STATE DOT COVID-19 RESPONSE

- **Roger Millar** of WSDOT said Washington has been responding to the COVID-19 crisis for some time. As of late March 19, the state had roughly 1,400 positive confirmed cases and 74 deaths. With the lack of testing, they anticipate the actual number of positive cases is much higher. WSDOT is focused on five areas in their response: 1) continuity of operations, 2) human resources, 3) IT, 4) transit operation, and 5) communications.
 - Regarding continuity of operations, the DOT is an essential service. They have kept rest areas open, as truckers need them to get their jobs done. They have 100+ construction projects in various stages of development, and are working with other organizations to make sure the construction sites are safe for those working there. They are supporting their state Department of Health and Emergency Management Department. One further item they are doing in relation to continuity of operations is financial analysis of the long-term hit, such as loss of revenues from gas tax, tolls, and ferry/train fares.
 - For human resources, all of their employees are concerned in varying degrees on how COVID-19 will affect them and others they are close to. The DOT has at least three dozen employees in quarantine, one confirmed positive, and one presumed positive. Every time the DOT gets notification from one of these people, the DOT has to talk to the others on the team, and get them information in a timely manner. Every one of their employees who can telework is teleworking, and that is working well. For others who can't, especially those who are in constant contact with the public, they and the DOT are very concerned about their safety, thus getting cleaning supplies, insisting on good practices and communicating.
 - Regarding IT, moving to a virtual DOT has taken an enormous hit on their bandwidth. They are tracking system usage and providing training. They have a limited supply of laptops, thus for others, they've worked to have those staff be on their home computers accessing the mothership, while keeping the mothership secure from intrusion.
 - For their ferry system, they have minimum crewing requirements from the Coast Guard, and are having a number of employees call in sick, thus that is a situation they are closely tracking. They have delayed their service to Canada, and are strongly considering delaying the switch from the winter schedule to the spring schedule.
 - Regarding communications, it is very important to communicate with employees, ferry communities (in the case of WSDOT), the trucking/freight industry, contractors, and the public. If you are not providing them good sources of information, they may be picking up bad sources. WSDOT is also providing traffic counts to the Governor's

office to help determine if more drastic action (beyond closing schools, restaurants, bars, etc.) is needed.

- **Mr. McKenna** of MoDOT said apart from that they are earlier in the COVID-19 response process compared to WSDOT and not having modes such as ferries, they are in a similar situation to WSDOT. Roughly two months ago, after seeing what was happening in Wuhan, they brought back the pandemic response section, updating it for COVID-19. The plan is fully operational at this point. They have an incident command team structured in place. They are setting up the ability to track and respond to resource requests coming in from other agencies, recognizing they will be asked to do tasks not part of their traditional role, which they are embracing. Like WSDOT, they are focused on continuing to support the essential function of transportation in the state. They had their bid opening as scheduled on March 20. Pre-bid and pre-construction meetings are being conducted virtually. Continuing operations plans are in place for financial services, thus payments to contractors/consultants will be unaffected. Similar to WSDOT, all functions in the DOT that can telework are doing so. For those in the field, the DOT is employing sanitation efforts between shifts. They have kept rest areas open, the cleaning subcontractors for which are among the most at-risk populations, thus MoDOT has lost much of that work availability, and in response have put new contracts in place. They have extensive damage to the levee system for the major rivers across the state, and have started to experience elevated rains/flooding, and thus have much of their normal operations dealing with road closures/barricades/etc. MoDOT, at the instruction of the Governor, will be rewriting its budget to reflect current circumstances, and looking at redirecting discretionary spending into mandatory spending.
- **Stephen Brich** of VDOT said they have daily communication with their construction and maintenance industry to identify any issues they're experiencing on their current projects/labor force health, and continuing to look at their supply chain both short- and long-term. The construction/maintenance projects remain active, and they are going through active procurements/bid lettings. Mr. Brich noted he had recently sent a letter to industry indicating the DOT will take a common sense approach on any potential shutdowns/staffing issues, and revisit fixed construction dates on an as-needed basis. They have received many questions on certifications (asphalt, concrete, etc.), and they have made an executive decision to extend existing certifications for 60 days to their contracting industry. They are extending lane closure periods of time, to allow contractors to be more productive in these times of lesser traffic. Public hearings for the next 30 days have been postponed, and they will continue to be reevaluated on a rolling two-week basis. VDOT has also kept rest areas open, increasing frequency of cleaning. For their ferry system, in order to prevent cross-contamination should a member(s) of a crew test positive, they are making sure the same crew works on the same ship. Consultant procurement is going forward as scheduled, though for their mandatory interview process, they have switched that to be phone-only. Any employee eligible to telework is mandated to telework. If someone does not have a laptop, they are able to take their desktop units home. For their call center, they are moving half of those staff to another location and staggering hours to ensure continuity of operations. For their DOT, they are putting together a daily workbook looking at staffing levels ensuring they continue to maintain essential services. One employee at one of VDOT's traffic operations center did come forward saying they were sick. They are awaiting test results, but VDOT has closed that facility and scaled over to another TOC. Texas has put out guidance to field staff regarding social distancing, and Virginia has modified that and used it themselves, which has

proved effective. Communication out to the field goes a long way. As of 5 PM March 20, VDOT closed their central office as well as their district and field offices to the public, and will be instituting an appointment-only system for services that cannot be provided online.

- **Toks Omishakin** of CalTrans said the largest concerns are the 65-and-over and homeless populations. There has been one homeless death in CA due to COVID-19, and CalTrans staff is often the team involved in clearing homeless encampments on state rights-of-way. With the hygiene issues of homeless encampments, the ability for COVID-19 to spread quickly is high. Due to this, the Governor has been paying greater attention to the homeless in providing services and shelter, because if that population is not cared for, COVID-19 can spread easily to the sheltered public. For internal purposes, CalTrans is utilizing teleworking to the best of their ability, and creating depth charts, so that if a director/manager becomes ill, it is easily known who is on the levels below him/her. With CalTrans' staff of 21,000, getting all of those teleworking up to speed has been a difficult task. They worked out an agreement with Dell to order 3,000 laptops and 2,000 mobile devices (iPads and cell phones). On an external front, nearly a week ago, they began to use their ~700 CMS signs, projecting messages regarding the COVID-19 issue. 23 out of their 86 rest areas in the state are closed, though due to seasonal/construction reasons rather than COVID-19. The transit industry has taken a very severe hit on ridership, and many providers have gone to an amended service schedule. The contractor industry has let the administration know they would like to keep projects going, though a couple larger contractors have said they will not perform work currently.
- **Marc Williams** of TxDOT said they went to full telework on March 16. Five to six years ago, they implemented all staff having laptops as their work computer, so that has aided ease of the telework process. Mr. Williams posted TxDOT's guidance to field staff and their directive on telework to the TPF Workplace page. They have cancelled all of their public meetings and travel. Their commission meeting the week of March 23 will be held virtually. They reached out to FHWA and have begun to receive concurrence on being able to conduct public engagement virtually. Texas has been utilizing CMS signs as well.

FEDERAL UPDATE

Joung Lee of AASHTO said conversations have been started on the Hill about a 4th phase of COVID-19 federal response legislation, even as the 3rd is still being debated. To ensure AASHTO is involved to provide the needs of state DOTs, a [letter](#) was sent from AASHTO to congressional leaders on March 18, identifying three immediate asks and then laying down a marker for a 4th. The three immediate asks are: 1) a nationwide waiver of truck weight restrictions to enable delivery of emergency supplies, 2) backstopping estimated reductions in state highway revenues, and 3) providing operational support for state-supported passenger rail service. The marker laid down is that, as Congress looks for longer-term economic recovery tools, transportation is the ideal investment.

Jim Tymon said AASHTO has received best practices from certain states in a written form, and are looking to set up a web-based password-protected platform to house that info allowing those on the call to look that over, with the recognition procedures/policies are constantly changing. If states have additional info or questions, please reach out to AASHTO staff.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: For WSDOT, relative to construction, are restrictions in place to limit inspection or contractor staff interaction with private entities (e.g., restaurants and gas stations) to mitigate the spread? (Asked by Yassmin Gramian, Pennsylvania)

A: Mr. Millar noted all restaurants are closed apart from take-out/delivery. For WSDOT staff, they have shared the latest Department of Health guidelines to prevent spread. With other organizations, WSDOT is developing a COVID-19-specific health and safety plan for each of their contracts, and are requiring that from their contractors. They are having a statewide stand down on March 23, so that labor and management can talk on the job site about the specifics for each contract. As a number of WSDOT employees themselves or others in their home are in at-risk categories, the DOT has been flexible on them using sick leave/paid admin leave.

Q: It would be great to share the communications everyone is sharing with the workforce that cannot work remotely. I sent a thank-you to our field and maintenance staff yesterday, but examples are helpful. (Asked by Margaret Anderson Kelliher, Minnesota)

A: Mr. Millar noted staff are communicating through AASHTO committees. One of the things WSDOT is doing is identifying heroes (people that have to be there and are getting the job done) and recognizing them in internal and external communications.

Q: Are states going to continue construction if there is a shelter in place from your Governor's Office? (Asked by Christy Hall, South Carolina)

A: Mr. Omishakin said that it will continue in California. They have gone through a process to determine critical infrastructure projects, which includes most major projects. For certain projects, work may be dialed back, but that would be a decision made at CalTrans. Mr. Millar said WSDOT's contractors are required to provide crews, materials, etc., and if they cannot do that for whatever reason, they are able to request an extension of time but not additional money. If the DOT is the one that shuts them down, the DOT is on the hook for time and money. If every project is shut down in Washington, their estimate is it could cost the DOT up to \$3M/day. Worker and public safety is at the top of their list, though how that is done and communicated could have significant financial consequences.

Q: Was WSDOT's essential business designation for highway construction projects a state or federal designation? (Asked by Russell McMurry, Georgia)

A: Federal. On March 19, the Department of Homeland Security released [guidance](#) on Critical Infrastructure Workers during COVID-19. Most of the transportation designations are found in the "transportation" or "public works" sections.

Q: How are states handling their homeless enforcements? Are you holding off for now, or are you continuing enforcements on your rights-of-way? (Asked by Ed Sniffen, Hawaii)

A: Mr. Omishakin said California, for the most part, is standing down. They have a hazmat contract across the state, and where the DOT deems an encampment creates an unsafe condition for others, they will use that hazmat team. Mr. Millar concurred for WSDOT.

Q: For WSDOT, you mentioned repurposing of desktops for telecommuting. How did that work? Did you send IT staff out to homes to install? (Asked by Kevin Biesty, Arizona)

A: No, IT staff was not sent to homes. Where possible, they provided laptops. Regarding desktops, it was left to the discretion of division administrators with the recognition the DOT would not be able to provide the IT support, though they are implementing documentation that it will be used for work purposes and that it will come back to the DOT. An important issue is keeping the WSDOT network secure with everyone accessing it various ways.

Q: Given what we anticipate to be the impacts of COVID-19, is there an interest in requesting an extension of OA obligation to allow Federal funds to carry over to 2021? (Asked by Kyle Schneweis, Nebraska)

A: Mr. Tymon said that is an issue AASHTO staff can put on the radar.

Q: Are any of you entertaining waivers for size and weight for freight? (Asked by Raymond Mabey, Oregon)

A: Yes, this was the first of four requests to Congress in the [AASHTO letter](#) dated March 18, 2020.

REMAINING QUESTIONS

Q: On the construction programs, what are the limitations, if any, that panelists have been put in place at their DOTs? Are you still bidding new projects, are you issuing NTPs, and are there any classifications of work that you have suspended due to supply chain concerns (like interstate pavement) or because they are non-critical? (Asked by Jonathan Gulliver, Massachusetts)

Q: Is anyone seeing supply chain issues in construction? (Asked by Raymond Mabey, Oregon)

Q: Like I've heard from most states, we're intending to continue forward with construction projects. Today, we've had several instances of contractors voluntarily shutting down their operations, in part or in whole, due to actual worker exposure and/or exposure concerns. Has anyone else seen this starting to happen?

COMMENTS

Anna Bosin, Alaska: We made a portal for the earthquake response, and can send you to look at this public-facing platform.

Margaret Anderson Kelliher, Minnesota: We sent desktops home as well, and we had people record the serial number. MN has a spreadsheet developed on this. Maybe we can share the template.

Yassmin Gramian, Pennsylvania: Suggestion for AASHTO--appreciate the call, but I suggest gathering written efforts from all states to share with others best practices and opportunities for improvement or things would have done differently. Should not be a heavy lift--comms efforts are likely compiling the story.