

Move PGH effort would analyze city's disjointed transportation system

Wednesday, January 27, 2010

By Rich Lord and Jon Schmitz, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl figures it's possible to get from Brighton Heights to Brookline without a car, but he can't tell you how.

"Would it be easy for one to do that, or would there be an easy way for one to know how to get there? Probably not," he said yesterday. The city's mix of paths and lanes, roads and busways, T lines and inclines "don't work together to the extent that they should."

That's something he hopes to remedy with a process that starts with a meeting today, continues with a study beginning late this year, and may include money from the Centers for Disease Control and the federal Department of Transportation.

"We're trying to put [city transportation planning] ahead of the curve, trying to put ourselves in a better position when that next round of transportation funding comes out," said Planning Director Noor Ismail.

The city effort is called Move PGH, and the first step is a meeting in the mayor's office today for prospective members of a 13-member task force and a 29-member management committee, including city directors and officials from other transportation agencies. Mr. Ravenstahl plans to ask them to help set the stage for the selection of a consultant, who will guide the \$1.1 million process of analyzing and planning the city's transportation system.

"No one in the city can [now] say, what is our complete bike system versus our transit system," said city Transportation Planner Patrick D. Roberts. "You need to map out the entire city to show where your conflicts are" between feet, bikes, buses, cars and rails.

Working through the Allegheny County Health Department, the city is seeking \$500,000 from the Centers for Disease Control to help pay for the study. The theory is that more walking and cycling would reduce obesity and lower pollution.

There's no guarantee that the CDC will fund the effort, but it has paid for transportation changes before. In Lake Moses, Wash., for instance, the agency helped bring about wider sidewalks and foot and bike trails.

Another goal is to use mobility to spur development, said Ms. Ismail. "There is no real connection between transportation and land use right now," she said, but a study could start to change that by linking the next 20 years of transportation improvements to development goals.

If the study is done and adopted by the city, the countywide, regional and state organizations that handle much of the transportation work in the city would need to respect it, said Mr. Roberts.

Dan Cessna, district executive for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, said he wanted to learn more about the new group and how it will tie in with the region's long-range transportation plan and federal requirements.

"I'm anxious to learn what the exact objectives are and what the goals will be for their program," he said. "I respect anybody who wants to do a better job planning transportation within their boundaries."

He said the department already goes "to great lengths" to coordinate with the city on projects. The department has implemented "smart transportation" policies that the new city group appears to embrace, including linking new transportation improvements to land-use planning and a "fix-it-first" approach to allocating money.

Under state policy, at least 90 percent of spending must go to preserve existing assets -- fixing bridges, resurfacing roads, repairing tunnels, he said. In reality, 95 percent is spent that way.

With limited funding, "what we want to do competes with just holding the transportation system together," he said.

Chuck DiPietro, transportation planning director for the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, made up of 10 counties, said the city's initiative "makes a lot of sense."

The group may have more freedom to develop an ambitious vision for long-term transportation improvements than the commission, which faces funding constraints in drafting its long-range plans, he said.

Ernie Hogan, director of development for East Liberty Development Inc., and an invitee to the meeting, said that an inefficient bus loop and the lack of bike lanes have been hurdles to development in that neighborhood.

Those problems are being remedied, but a transportation plan would be "a way to really unlock neighborhoods and start to create economic opportunities."

"No matter who you are and where you live in Pittsburgh," the mayor said, the study "will affect you in some way, and hopefully a positive way."