

Regional Environmental Roundtable

Member Question & Answers as of April 2020

1. What feedback on environmental data sets has been received from the Roundtable?

Through the end of March, GNRC has received feedback and additional recommendations on specific data sets from the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, The Nature Conservancy, the Land Trust for Tennessee and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Much of this input has focused on habitat-related data. GNRC staff is working to integrate this data where appropriate into the definition of Environmentally Sensitive Areas for use in the development of the Unified Transportation Plan. These data sets are very likely to have additional applications in the work of the Roundtable, especially as it turns its attention to the development of a Regional Conservation & Preservation Strategy.

2. How will transportation projects will be evaluated during the Unified Transportation Plan development process?

During April and May 2020, GNRC staff will be reviewing each of the project applications that it has received from communities across the 7-county transportation planning region. As of early April 2020, a total of 360 project applications have been received, of which approximately 300 would be suitable for a project-level environmental analysis. The remaining project applications are programmatic in nature, e.g. transit, technology or safety, for which environmental analysis is not appropriate.

The project-level analysis is proposed by GNRC to include two different tiers, as described below.

Tier 1 Environmental Analysis	Tier 2 Environmental Analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All non-programmatic project applications • 300 projects estimated • General assessment of potential environmental disruption based on geographic comparison to environmentally sensitive areas • General guidance to project sponsors to help mitigate potential disruption or impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small subset of non-programmatic project applications • 10-20 projects estimated • Projects large in scope (\$\$), soon to be constructed but still pre-NEPA • More detailed analysis of potential project impacts and customized recommendations for alternative design considerations or mitigation strategies • Establish repository of project information and increasing access by stakeholders

3. Can the Roundtable’s work help advance transportation planning and decision-making above and beyond the environmental compliance frame?

Yes, although this is likely to occur as a result of an iterative and evolutionary process and will require time, patience, and ongoing engagement from Roundtable members. Presently, there are three ways in which the Roundtable can help advance transportation planning and decision-making above and beyond the compliance frame.

First, the Roundtable can provide guidance on how the long-range planning process should evaluate individual projects that are considered for inclusion into the Unified Transportation Plan. This is specifically done through the Tier 1 and Tier 2 environmental analysis described in #2 above. And, while the focus is currently on the Unified Transportation Plan for 2045, this long range planning process will continue to be repeated every 5 years, which will present opportunities for continual improvement in the ways that projects are evaluated in future planning cycles.

Second, the Roundtable can provide guidance on how the Unified Transportation Plan, taken as a whole, will be evaluated for aggregate environmental impacts. More details on how the Roundtable can do this will be shared later in 2020 or very early in 2021.

Finally, the Roundtable can make substantial contributions to the development of the Regional Conservation & Preservation Strategy that was discussed briefly at the Roundtable's kickoff meeting. As described at the March 11, 2020 meeting, the Regional Conservation & Preservation Strategy is intended to characterize current environmental conditions, regional conservation and preservation priorities and recommendations on how to achieve those priorities. This strategy document will be a major ongoing focus of the Roundtable throughout the remainder of 2020.

If, as intended, the Regional Conservation & Preservation Strategy is used as an input into future long-range transportation planning cycles, it will force the decision-making associated with those planning cycles to respond to the stated regional priorities. This will perhaps be the greatest opportunity for the Roundtable's work to push transportation-planning beyond the compliance frame.

4. Within the definition of Environmentally Sensitive Areas there are several different environmental factors, e.g. floodplains, surface water, habitat. Will it be possible to establish relative/weighted values for each of these factors?

Possibly. With feedback and ongoing engagement of several Roundtable members, GNRC is working to refine and finalize the definition of Environmentally Sensitive Areas. GNRC will bring a final proposed definition of the ESA back to the Roundtable later in April or in May, and at that time the Roundtable can discuss whether there is value in establishing relative weights among the factors used to define the ESA.

5. Is it possible to determine the relative ecological value of each environmental factor in order to better evaluate the impacts a transportation project may have on environmental resources?

Possibly. For the current Unified Transportation Plan cycle, this work would likely be better suited to the aggregate environmental impact analysis that is described in #3 above. However, it is also possible to explore how this analysis could be applied as part of the project-level analysis for the current and/or future planning cycles.

6. Can the Roundtable's objectives and outcomes be measured or evaluated over time?

Yes. During Roundtable meetings members will have the opportunity to discuss the purpose, objectives, and outcomes of the Roundtable itself. As part of these discussions GNRC will

include a focus on the ongoing evaluation of progress in achieving the stated objectives and generating the intended outcomes. It will be helpful for Roundtable members to participate and help make decisions about these aspects of its work.

7. How long is the Roundtable expected to meet?

GNRC has asked members for an initial commitment to participate in the Roundtable through December of 2020. This would include monthly meetings and the potential for additional interactions such as calls, surveys, and draft document review in between meetings to advance the Roundtable's work.

While GNRC does anticipate a need for ongoing meetings beyond 2020, it is too early to determine what that should look like. In Fall 2020 the Roundtable can begin discussing what its work might look like in 2021 and can explore if and how it may continue to convene in an ongoing manner.