



9th National Conference on Transportation Planning For Small & Medium-Sized Communities

Colorado Springs, Colorado

Session 2: MPOs: Who, What, and How
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Summary

At a session organized by the FHWA Office of Planning, Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), State DOT, and transit agency staff, and others who work with the metropolitan transportation planning process discussed current issues and problems and shared advice and solutions. Major topics included in the facilitated discussion were organizational structure, financial planning, and the role of transit in the MPO process.

Advice from the group included:

- Use a variety of tactics to get the key players involved
- Encourage cooperation between jurisdictions by promoting regionalism
- Take advantage of the resources offered by state DOT and FHWA division office
- Look beyond transportation organizations for funding
- Consider innovative project funding sources, such as grants from wellness foundations or FTA's United We Ride Program

I. MPO Organizational Structure

Who are the major participants in your metropolitan transportation planning process?

Participation in the MPO planning process by the various groups varies from state to state, and from MPO to MPO. The following table identifies a sampling of those groups and organizations who are actively involved in MPO planning activities.

Within the MPO	Local Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Board • Executive Board • Technical Advisory Committee • Citizens' Committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City and county governments • Health department • Planning and zoning commissions • School Districts • Local Law Enforcement • EMS • Irrigation Districts
Transportation Organizations	Private
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transit / transportation providers • Aviation – public • Port or other freight movement • State Trucking Association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local private non-profit development groups • Economic development organizations • Universities • Traveler Services

State and Federal	Tribal nations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military bases • Air Quality Agencies • State DOT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elders • Staff • Cultural and spiritual leaders and experts

How do you get the key players involved?

- Using mailing lists / e-newsletters
- Establishing and maintaining websites
- Using a speakers bureau to get information out about the MPO process
- Inviting groups to make presentations to the policy board
- Hiring a public information officer
- Getting stakeholders to recognize that their decisions impact the regional transportation system.

How would you describe the level of cooperation with your partner agencies in conducting the transportation planning process?

“Just because they sit on the same board doesn’t mean they get along.” Minnesota

Participants identified challenges in getting jurisdictions to agree to an organizational structure, particularly in the case of a new MPO or one with new jurisdictions. Common problems are the refusal of a jurisdiction to participate and the tendency for the major city or county to dominate the process. This can be exacerbated when the MPO staff is co-located with or staffed by the major city or county. MPO work may take second priority to city/county work, or there may be a danger that the city or county’s priorities and projects will overwhelm the other jurisdictions in the MPO.

While there are numerous ways to organize an MPO, attendees generally agreed that, where feasible, a standalone MPO or one that is part of a regional organization is preferable to one lead by a single city or county. A benefit of co-location, however, is that implementation of projects within that jurisdiction may be smoother.

Are there specific strategies or actions that you have taken to foster improved cooperation?

Attendees reported difficulty in getting board and committee members to think outside of their jurisdiction and consider the regional impacts of projects. Longstanding political issues also had a tendency to spill over into MPO work.

“Keep saying ‘regional, regional, regional’ until they can’t hear anything else.” North Dakota

A common theme was the desire to encourage regional thinking by board members. For those MPOs that span multiple states, regional thinking is especially important. Engaging the leaders by fostering regionalism and stressing the regional significance of projects is critical in getting the board to think regionally. This is also an area where state DOTs can play an important role.

Participants noted other strategies:

- Ensure that all jurisdictions are represented on the board.
- Bring in the state DOT to help resolve disputes and explain regional impacts.
- Create Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) to explicitly delineate roles and responsibilities.
- Develop a rating criteria system for the TIP to help take the politics out of the decisionmaking.

- Engage local businesspeople, as they are likely to be listened to by the decisionmakers.
- Weight the votes to ensure that no one jurisdiction monopolizes the process.

What is the role of the state DOT with respect to the transportation planning process?

When discussing the appropriate level of involvement for the state, attendees agreed that providing resources and technical support were helpful. Disseminating information between the MPOs was also encouraged. For example, The Maine DOT holds a one-day conference for all four MPOs each year to share lessons learned and new ideas.

Involvement in the day-to-day affairs of the MPO depends on the maturity of the MPO and the presence of local leadership, but may also vary according to the preference of the MPO. Attendees agreed that involvement of the state tends to be highest in the years immediately after the establishment of a new MPO and then taper off.

As noted above, attendees felt that encouraging regional thinking and cooperation between jurisdictions are appropriate roles for the state DOT.

What procedure do you use for making administrative changes to MPO documents?

Many MPOs have a simplified procedure in place for making administrative changes to MPO transportation planning-related documents without Policy Board or Executive Board approval. Some had set up specific criteria, for example, if a change represents less than X% of the budget, it does not require approval. In another area, an MOU had been signed to formally designate which changes did and did not occur. One attendee noted that whenever there are environmental justice implications to a change, they are careful to go through the formal process.

II. Financial Planning

How do you forecast future revenues and funding streams?

Workshop participants noted that historical funding levels were frequently used in forecasting. On the subject of earmarked funding, there was general agreement that they assume the level of earmarked funding the MPO received in the past will continue into the future when preparing their financial projections.

The Oregon DOT did a 20-year economic forecast and distributed it to the MPOs for use in long-range planning.

A California MPO representative noted that fiscal constraint is an “old-fashioned” concept in his state, as historical trends aren’t valid in California currently, given state budget constraints. They are using modeling to project funding, but state funding is extremely uncertain. This makes forecasting revenues extremely challenging.

“We’ve been successful using CMAQ and TE funds for small projects. It’s a lot of work to apply, do the analysis, and get the stakeholders involved, but it’s worth it. We also have an air quality planner and work closely with the state.” - Kentucky

How do you estimate project costs?

- Work with the primary implementers – local engineers, MPOs – and local banks, which may be able to provide local and regional cost escalation coordinators.
- Hire a consultant or cost estimation coordinator to set up parameters.
- State DOTs may be able to provide MPOs with a project cost estimation system.
- Never underestimate the power of the contingency, especially in engineering and construction. For big projects: put the engineering costs two years ahead (of construction) in the TIP. Also consider using a standard inflation factor in all calculations.

How are federal funds allocated to the MPOs in your state?

- In Yuma, AZ the MPOs sit on the State’s resource allocation advisory committee of the State Transportation Board. This committee makes decisions on allocating federal funding to the MPOs.
- In Maine, The MPOs went to the state to have the funding share increased from 10% to 22-23%, arguing that the MPO areas represented had 25% of pop and VMT.
- Colorado set up a task force with representatives from the non-metro areas, MPOs, and the state DOT and transportation commission. This helped get some buy-in on the process and led to much more involvement of non-state folks in the process.
- Minnesota is doing a similar thing right now. The districts are broken up by the state – affording the MPOs a seat at the table for allocation of federal funds at the next authorization. They will be deciding, according to weighted criteria, how to spend the funds.
- In Georgia, projects in the long-range plan are ranked by priority. This helps the state DOT allocate its resources.
- In Kentucky, the MPOs create a prioritized unscheduled needs list, which is given to the DOT to help allocate the resources. This is done to help get the local perspective when making allocation decisions.

Have you taken advantage, or are you aware, of the flexible funding processes for FHWA and FTA funds?

The majority of attendees indicated that they are aware of the flexible funding processes and many had taken advantage of them. Some were using Surface Transportation Program (STP) funding for planning purposes.

“We get ~25% of our funding from foundation grants, especially for bike or pedestrian projects from wellness foundations. We have a grant writer in the economic development organization and have teamed up with the medical center. Look outside of transportation organizations for funding.” - Maine

What funding sources do you use?

MPOs reported using a wide variety of traditional and innovative funding sources, noted below.

Federal Transportation Funding	Other Federal Funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • STP funding • Consolidated planning grant – 5303 funds • Earmarks • Congestion Management and Air Quality (CMAQ) funding • Transportation Enhancement funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Defense (for particular projects) • CDBG funding • Homeland security funding
Other Governmental Funding	Private sources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loans from state infrastructure banks • Sales tax improvement district dedicated to transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder funding: business and neighborhood associations, universities • Advertising revenues (primarily transit infrastructure) • Foundation grants
In-kind funding	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universities have provided master’s students to do preliminary design concepts • Utilities and local businesses have provided matching funds or in-kind matches (land dedication, CNG fuel) for projects that impact them 	

How do you account for Maintenance and Operations costs?

Many MPOs reported that their long-range planning was evolving from capital-intensive system expansion to focusing on system maintenance and operation, or system preservation. On the other hand, some high-growth areas are still expanding their systems.

Approaches to Maintenance and Operations in the long-range plan and TIP:

- Include Maintenance and Operations estimates in the long-range plan and TIP.
- Obtain a maintenance budget history from the MPO’s jurisdiction to plan for future needs.
- Engage in a proactive maintenance program.
- Create a new MPO standards and maintenance technical subcommittee.
- Address life-cycle costs of managing the transportation system (asset management).

“We have dedicated STP monies to signal retiming, which we perform about every two years. It really makes a difference in stop delay and emissions reductions and it’s popular with the public.” - Arkansas

III. Role of transit in the MPO

Attendees reported a wide range of relationships between the MPO and transit. Of the attendees, approximately 10 were from transit organizations or other organizations with a transit operations component. Some MPOs were also the transit authority or operator; still others played a role in coordinating multiple transit systems in their region.

Transit representatives participated in a variety of committees and boards at MPOs. Another common means of participation was to have transit representatives sitting on the technical advisory committee. In cities where transit was a city department, some chose to have separate representatives for the city and the transit agency at the MPO, where others had a single representative for both. In some cases, the transit representative was an ex-officio member.

How do you estimate transit costs and benefits?

A basic debate on this question was whether the costs and benefits should be related to economics, the environment, including air-quality and other quality of life issues, and congestion management. Attendees reported using different techniques, frequently working with consultant assistance. Ridership figures, social service benefits, economic benefits, and customer satisfaction were all used.

“We had a consultant do a survey on customer (taxpayer) satisfaction. They found an 85% satisfaction rate, which gave local decision-makers more information and ammunition for funding transit.” - Maine

Do you coordinate transit services with human services programs?

There was much interest in FTA’s United We Ride program, which provides funding for coordinating fixed route and paratransit services. The program is designed to help state and local planning organizations find better ways to coordinate paratransit service across user groups. Urban and rural areas can participate; even very low density areas can receive grants. The lead agency will depend on the area. There have been conflicts between federal and local agencies over the appropriateness of using one agency’s vehicles to serve another’s mission. This issue is being negotiated at the federal level after the issuance of the Executive Order on Human Service Transportation Coordination (Executive Order 13330).

One area that had received a grant in Arkansas also took advantage of the TPCB Program’s peer exchange program to hold a peer exchange <www.planning.dot.gov/Peer/Arkansas/arkansas.htm> on the issues of cooperation – central dispatch, coordination of services, publicity, all info for all services. The representative also noted they are creating a pool of drivers across systems by streamlining drug testing and licensing.

Resources for more information on coordination with human services programs:

- United We Ride <www.fta.dot.gov/CCAM/www/index.html>
- North Dakota State University: Small Urban & Rural Transit Center of the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute <www.ugpti.org/research/transit/>
- Montana State University: Western Transportation Institute <www.coe.montana.edu/wti/>
- Community Association for Rural Transportation (CART) in Harrisonburg, VA has done work on the logistics of cost sharing <www.charityadvantage.com/cart/Home.asp>.
- AARP Research on Mobility of an aging population <<http://research.aarp.org/>>

Appendix

Summary of Attendance

The half-day workshop was held as a preliminary event to TRB's 9th *National Conference on Transportation Planning For Small & Medium-Sized Communities* in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

There were 72 people from 28 US states and one Canadian province in attendance. These included representatives from Federal, State, and local agencies as well as consultants and academicians. The workshop was intended for new MPOs (there were five). However, there were at least twice that many of the older MPOs who had new MPO directors in attendance. In general, the participants, novice to expert, indicated a desire to learn from their peers no matter what level of expertise they individually held.

Organization Type	Attendees
MPO (total)	24
<i>MPO established in 2000 or later</i>	5
<i>MPO established prior to 1980</i>	15
City Government	6
Other Local Agency	3
State DOT	14
USDOT	10
Consultant	7
Others	8
Total	72

State and Provincial Representatives:

Arizona	Maine	North Dakota
Arkansas	Maryland	Oklahoma
California	Massachusetts	Oregon
Colorado	Minnesota	South Dakota
Connecticut	Mississippi	Texas
District of Columbia	Missouri	Virginia
Georgia	Montana	Washington
Idaho	New Hampshire	Wyoming
Iowa	New Mexico	
Kentucky	North Carolina	Ontario

Transportation Planning & Environment Resources:

- USDOT Transportation Planning Capacity Building Program <www.planning.dot.gov/>
- FHWA Planning, Environment, & Realty Services <www.fhwa.dot.gov/hep/>
- FTA Transportation Planning & Environment
<http://www.fta.dot.gov/grant_programs/transportation_planning/3875_ENG_HTML.htm>