

Indiana MPO Council

Regional Models of Cooperation Case Study Series

United, Informal Collaboration Yields 30 Years Success for Indiana MPOs

For the past 30 years, Indiana’s 14 metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) have met regularly to solve problems through a statewide collaboration called the Indiana MPO Council. The Council has successfully tackled regional issues such as shifts in funding allocations, planning regulation updates, and air quality concerns, making it a trusted and reliable resource for the MPOs as well as state and federal agencies, such as the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). This decades-long collaboration has ensured that available funds are distributed fairly among all of Indiana’s MPOs, leading to uniform, yet tailored projects and processes that have benefitted residents in Indiana cities and towns both large and small.

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

Grant funding can be a difficult topic to broach among MPOs, especially since they must often compete with each other for the same funds. Nonetheless, the topic was often discussed among Indiana’s MPOs at INDOT’s annual, statewide meetings. Little on the subject was typically resolved at these meetings. To attract greater federal investment in Indiana and to better distribute such investment throughout the State, the MPOs’ executive directors decided to break away from state-focused meetings and discuss their issues separately. Thus in the early 1980s, Indiana’s 14 MPOs formed the Indiana MPO Council with the intent to work together on mutually beneficial projects, specifically funding opportunities.

Collaboration Structure

Once per month, the MPO executive directors hold an in-person Council meeting in Indianapolis where they discuss a formal, MPO-sourced agenda that may cover a wide variety of topics such as new modeling and data technologies, planning regulations, improved internal processes, planning emphasis areas, and partnerships with State and Federal agencies. The MPO directors also use meetings to update one another on projects that their Council committees have undertaken or completed. The committees address a number of issues including, for example, MPO policies and processes, project development, pavement management, local and sustainable communities, airports, and training.

Prior to each meeting, a staff member from the South Bend MPO solicits agenda items, compiles the agenda, and distributes it among the MPO directors. This is the only “formal” position within the Council, and it is a volunteer position that has helped the MPOs to coordinate their Council communications. All members—those that serve both large and small urban areas—are responsible for contributing equally to Council tasks and initiatives.

Monthly meetings are an important and productive way to address statewide issues as well as localized problems where the MPOs may offer one another advice. However, coordination among MPO staff is ongoing, and initiatives that are agreed upon at monthly Council meetings are implemented by staff members on a day-to-day basis.



In addition to monthly meetings, each MPO rotates the responsibility of hosting an annual 2½-day Council conference, which also includes staff from INDOT, FHWA & consulting firms. The conference location rotates each year so that participants from the MPOs have the opportunity to explore a part of the State that they may not have the opportunity to visit otherwise. The host is responsible for designing and implementing the annual awards program that recognizes various MPO contributions to planning, construction, and partnership programs throughout Indiana.

The Council periodically revisits the idea to make the organization more structured by establishing bylaws and designing requirements for the member MPOs to follow. Decades of successful collaborative work have convinced the MPOs that the Council's current structure has been advantageous to all of them and does not warrant significant changes.

Collaboration Accomplishments

Around the same time the Council was founded, the MPOs worked together to develop a Planning Fund (PL) funding formula that provides a method and calculations process for MPO PL distribution and is agreed to annually by INDOT and FHWA. This is in addition to a Local Sharing Agreement, published annually by INDOT, the Council, and numerous state agencies, that outlines the category of funds and traditional split of federal funds between the State and local public agencies. Based on these collaborative efforts to allocate funds, the Council and its partners have been able to advocate for additional funding. Allowing the MPOs to make allocations as a group builds better transparency throughout the State and ensures that the money goes towards projects where it is needed the most.

More recently, the Council has been working with INDOT using their State Project Management System that will track how much funding is allocated to individual projects so that current and long-term funding issues can be managed. In addition, the Council developed and supported the statewide implementation of quarterly project tracking from preliminary engineering to design and row-of-way acquisition, which has been an effective way to support local public agencies and improve project development and delivery.

Almost every MPO now has a sidewalk inventory thanks to the Council's efforts to standardize pavement and asset management throughout Indiana with help from State and federal partners. The Council has also supported a statewide effort to help local agencies develop transition plans to ensure they will meet Americans with Disabilities Act compliance requirements.

These are just a few of the many projects, processes, and programs the Council has developed and implemented as a result of its sustained efforts to achieve multijurisdictional cooperation. Guidance and planning efforts that occur together at the director level translate into coordinated, streamlined work at the technical level because of the relationships cultivated by the Council.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The Council is successful, in part, due to the consistency of its participants. Many of the MPOs' executive directors have served in their positions for many years, which are tenures that provide valuable institutional knowledge and cohesion among the directors. When a new MPO executive director is appointed, the current Council members proactively demonstrate the value of active participation. In this way, involvement is never



depicted as a requirement and is instead seen as a mutually beneficial opportunity for the new MPO director and the other Council members.

The Council has also been fortunate that one MPO has volunteered to provide a staff member to coordinate all meetings and communications. Had this not been the case, or if it does not remain this way in the future, the Council will need to devise a way for the MPOs to rotate such responsibilities.

After so many years of collaboration and considering the many political and regulatory changes that occur in federal, state, and local government, the Council can boast an impressive number of planning, funding, and policy achievements for themselves, their partner agencies, and the State of Indiana. An open, informal structure that is grounded in the motivation to achieve more for everyone by working together, has brought the Council lasting success that seems poised for many more years of prosperous cooperation.

