

Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Roundtables

Regional Models of Cooperation Case Study Series

Multi-State Roundtables Inspire Multijurisdictional Coordination Efforts

The Mid-Atlantic region shares many planning challenges as part of the greater Metro Washington area. From commuting patterns to weather vulnerabilities, local agencies realized they could share best practices across MPO and state boundaries to improve the effectiveness of their plans. Between 2005 and 2012, the MPOs and regional commissions held eight Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Roundtables and have built lasting interagency relationships that continue to enable collaborative planning efforts at the regional level.

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

In 2005, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' (MWCOC's) 2030 growth projections showed that the Northern Shenandoah Valley and surrounding regions would continue providing housing for jobs in the Metro Washington region for the next 25 years. To address the challenges of providing labor and housing in a region with local labor shortages caused by rising housing costs, MWCOC and the Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission (NSVRC) held the first Mid-Atlantic regional planning roundtable in October 2005. Other organizations joined the annual roundtables, recognizing the benefits of establishing connections with nearby agencies and sharing best practices related to regional issues such as air and water quality, freight, and long-distance commuting.



Map showing areas represented by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Roundtables

Collaboration Structure

The following partners have hosted roundtables: MWCOC, NSVRC, the Baltimore Metropolitan Council (BMC), the George Washington Regional Commission (GWRC), the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC), the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOC), the Wilmington Area Planning Council (WILMAPCO), the Maryland Department of Planning (MDP), and the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC). The National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), National Association of Development Organizations (NADO), and Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO) have provided sponsorship to eliminate participant registration fees and increase attendance. The American Planning Association's (APA) Regional and Intergovernmental Planning Division assumed responsibility for organizing and sponsoring the event in 2007. This APA Division funded the roundtables with help from Delaware, Maryland, the National Capital Area, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia APA Chapters. Later, the roundtables also received funding from regional science and consulting organizations, including the North American Regional Science Council (NARSC), the Regional Science Association International (RSAI), and the Regional Studies Association (RSA). NARC, NADO, and AMPO continued to publicize the roundtables, while regional commissions and MPOs hosted the events.



The APA Division and the host regional commission or MPO planned the roundtable agendas via conference call. They chose national, regional, and local topics relevant to agencies from Virginia to Pennsylvania, aiming for around 100 attendees at a one-day event. The topics included linking land-use and transportation, the ways in which rural and small metro regions could achieve smart and sustainable growth, and intermodal regional planning. In 2007, the attendees proposed strategies to establish an official mechanism for public officials and transportation practitioners to use University research; in 2008 they discussed authorization issues, needs, and goals for the new surface transportation authorization; and in 2012 they shared best practices related to energy efficiency and coastal mitigation.

Mainly senior staff from local and state agencies attended the roundtables, which acted as a forum for more technical information exchange than the policy-oriented NARC and AMPO meetings attended by MPO directors. After the roundtables started offering APA credits, many APA members also began participating. Finally, many universities, as well as national organizations like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Smart Growth Program, provided speakers for and led panels at the events.

Collaboration Accomplishments

In 2008, the roundtables received the APA Division Education Excellence Award for their success in promoting and sharing planning-related research and best practices between many levels of government in the Mid-Atlantic.

The roundtables also inspired, supported, and facilitated several large collaboration efforts within the Mid-Atlantic region. For instance, NJDOT began hosting coordination meetings with its three MPOs, and DVRPC, a bi-state MPO on the southern New Jersey and Pennsylvania border, continued quarterly coordination meetings that rotated among the Pennsylvania MPOs and addressed more local topics than the Mid-Atlantic roundtables. DVRPC and WILMAPCO, a bi-state MPO for the northern Delaware and Maryland region which borders DVRPC, continued to cooperate through planning for the multi-region, 18-county air quality non-attainment area, while also collaborating on freight and air transportation via DVRPC's Goods Movement and Airports Task Forces. Many of the MPOs have carried interregional coordination beyond the roundtables and into their Unified Planning Work Programs (UPWPs) by producing technical documents that surpass federal requirements in considering jurisdictions outside the MPOs' own planning borders.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The agencies learned that, for a large regional conference to succeed, it requires dedicated staff and leadership to organize the events. The last roundtable was held in 2012, and the leads have had difficulty finding volunteer hosts and organizers for future events. However, collaboration efforts amongst participants have continued on smaller geographic scales. These ongoing initiatives imitate the roundtables by allowing MPOs with common goals to share resources and collaborate on their plans, projects, and other topical issues.

From the roundtables, the participating agencies realized the benefits of working with established non-governmental organizations to facilitate communication, encourage participation, and share information on multijurisdictional planning processes.

By providing a forum for cross-agency planning discussions, the Mid-Atlantic roundtables facilitated regional relationships and enabled the information exchange necessary to strengthen multijurisdictional collaboration.

