

SB 375 MPO Working Group

Regional Models of Cooperation Case Study Series

California MPOs Team Up to Address Climate Change

Faced with legislative requirements to develop greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions targets and transportation, housing, and land use strategies to achieve GHG reductions, California MPOs began meeting regularly to coordinate methods for fulfilling these requirements. The meetings not only resulted in a consistent method for developing the MPOs' emissions targets, almost all of which the California Air Resources Board (ARB) accepted, but also developed into a forum for numerous other statewide initiatives, including California's new Cap-and-Trade Program.

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

In 2008, the California State Legislature passed the Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act (SB 375), which required each of the state's MPOs to work with the ARB on a regional target for passenger vehicle GHG emissions reductions. SB 375 also required MPOs to develop and adopt a "sustainable communities strategy" (SCS) that outlines transportation, housing, and land use plans to achieve their regional targets. Collectively, the MPOs recognized the need to develop consistent methods for determining these targets and, to facilitate this goal, created the SB 375 MPO Working Group.

Collaboration Structure

Originally, the SB 375 MPO Working Group meetings provided a relatively informal way for MPOs to share their strategies for conducting the required planning efforts. California's largest urban MPOs—the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), Los Angeles' Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG), and San Francisco's Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC)—led these efforts along with a representative from the eight Central Valley MPOs. The MPOs took turns organizing and hosting the meetings and planning the agendas. However, as the meetings became more formal and after the initial targets were set, the responsibility for planning and organizing them shifted to the California Association of Councils of Government (CALCOG), an organization which encompasses all the state's MPOs and COGs. Each member agency pays dues to fund CALCOG, which the MPOs and COGs have found an effective entity for not only facilitating the SB 375 meetings but also communicating their ideas to the state government.

Currently, the MPOs' Planning Directors meet about every two months to discuss SB 375 implementation activities and related planning developments. To encourage attendance at the meetings, they are held in Sacramento, a relatively central location, on the same day as meetings about other statewide initiatives like the California Transportation Plan (CTP) 2040. The meetings begin with a discussion between the MPOs, after which they are joined by their state partners, including the ARB and Caltrans. By providing a forum for sharing information and lessons learned, the meetings allow the MPOs to learn from each other and receive feedback from the state agencies. Each MPO then discusses the meeting outcomes internally and receives feedback from stakeholders, after which the MPOs reconvene and establish consensus about next steps.



CALCOG also hosts regular meetings for the MPOs' Executive Directors. These meetings focus on policy-level decisions and allow the Executive Directors to set goals for the Planning Director meetings, make budgetary decisions, and identify legislative initiatives to promote. The Planning Directors provide recommendations after discussing the technical aspects of any issues the Executive Directors highlight.

Collaboration Accomplishments

The first and largest accomplishment of the SB 375 meetings was nearly complete agreement on the GHG emissions targets for each MPO. Along with the Regional Targets Advisory Committee (RTAC), which was established by SB 375, the SB 375 MPO Working Group proposed GHG emissions targets for each region, almost all of which the ARB adopted. Moreover, the meetings increased the MPOs' capacity for measuring emissions and addressing the targets by sharing staff support and expertise, thereby decreasing overall costs.

The SB 375 meetings also benefited a number of other statewide initiatives and facilitated integrated planning processes for transportation, public health, land use, housing, water, and energy. While the meetings initially focused on the GHG emissions targets and SCS plans, other state agencies, like the Department of Public Health, soon saw the value of participating and began using the forum to receive input from the MPOs. The Strategic Growth Council, in particular, has sought MPO feedback to help develop and implement the state's Cap-and-Trade Program, which began in 2012. Thus, the SB 375 meetings have allowed the California MPOs to better address the interrelated nature of the GHG emissions targets, SCS plans, CTP 2040, and the new Cap-and-Trade Program.

Collaborating on many related programs not only allows the MPOs to make better-informed decisions about these initiatives, but also strengthens their influence on legislative matters. The SB 375 meetings allow the MPOs to establish consensus and work with state agencies to more fully understand various legislative proposals. Together, these processes lend the MPOs a stronger voice that carries more weight in the State Legislature's decisions.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Reaching consensus at SB 375 meetings requires more perseverance than the MPOs originally anticipated due in part to the differences between among MPOs, particularly urban and rural. However, the MPOs maintain their motivation to collaborate by continuously reaffirming the importance of sharing information and strategies related to their GHG targets, SCS plans, and other statewide initiatives. When developing statewide performance measures in 2013, the MPOs also overcame the struggle for consensus by agreeing that certain regions could adopt slightly different measures, recognizing the unique attributes of those regions.

The SB 375 MPO Coordination Meetings present an impressive example of multijurisdictional collaboration to address a pressing challenge—climate change. The global scale of this issue will require coordination at every level, and California's MPOs provide a model through their efforts to jointly develop and implement strategies to reduce GHG emissions.

