

Utah's Unified Transportation Plan

Regional Models of Cooperation Case Study Series

Joint Planning in Utah Improves Support for Investment in Transportation

Competition between MPOs, state DOTs and transit agencies can create inefficiencies in transportation planning, project prioritization and funding. Conversely, collaboration promotes efficiency, effective planning, and streamlined project delivery. Utah's four MPOs, understanding the value of collaboration, have partnered with the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) and the Utah Transit Authority (UTA) to integrate their Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs) into a Unified Transportation Plan for the entire state of Utah. They completed the first Unified Plan in 2007 and another in 2011, and are currently working on the 2015 Unified Plan. Acknowledging that the success of one transportation mode benefits the entire transportation system, just as the success of each region benefits the entire state, the agencies adopted new practices to serve the public more effectively and efficiently.

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

While the four Utah MPOs had strong relationships with UDOT and UTA since the first MPO was established in 1972, the MPOs had separate planning cycles and used different assumptions in their modeling. They did not have coordinated, shared priorities for project funding. To ensure the effective use of state funds, the State Legislature encouraged the MPOs to collaborate. In response, the Wasatch Front Regional Council (WFRC), the Mountainland Association of Governments (MAG), UDOT, and UTA entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to create a Joint Policy Advisory Committee (JPAC). This committee provided a forum for the policy makers to discuss issues, resolve inconsistencies and build the level of cooperation between the agencies. In 2007, the agencies updated the MOU to include the other MPOs in Utah, including the Cache Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO) and the Dixie Metropolitan Planning Organization (DMPO). As a result of these cooperative efforts the MPOs began aligning their planning cycles, financial assumptions and modeling approaches, and integrated their RTPs into the first Unified Transportation Plan in 2007. This enabled the partners to communicate the multi-modal transportation needs of the state in a consistent and unified way.

Collaboration Structure

To create the Unified Plan, JPAC formed a policy committee, a technical coordinating committee, and subcommittees on topics such as finance, safety, and data. These committees meet regularly to ensure that the agencies agree on the content of the Unified Plan. In addition to these formal committees, members of the participating agencies regularly and informally discuss issues that arise day-to-day.

The agencies share responsibility for coordinating the Unified Plan. UDOT organized meetings and led the process for the 2011 plan, while WFRC is acting as a coordinator for the 2015 update. To help with the 2011 Unified Plan the partners hired a consultant to edit the document. This cycle, the partners have hired a financial consultant to further refine their joint financial model. WFRC also maintains a joint travel demand model for the Ogden-Layton, Salt Lake-West Valley, and Provo-Orem Metropolitan areas, which enables WFRC, MAG, UDOT, and UTA to use common assumptions and analytical platforms in their planning for that region. UDOT,



meanwhile, coordinates a statewide transportation demand model and transportation forecasting model that integrates with the MPOs.

Each of the participating agencies designates funding in its budget to support collaborative efforts. In addition to the Unified Plan, the partners jointly fund many planning projects, regardless of which agency hires the contractor. For example, UDOT, WFRC and MAG helped fund UTA's "first and last mile study" because they understand that more efficient transit also relieves road traffic. UTA, for its part, contributes annual funding for joint corridor studies because of the benefits these provide to transit.

Collaboration Accomplishments

Developing the Unified Plan has not only enabled each of the MPOs to create better, more coordinated plans, but has also generated support for significant investment in transportation projects. All the transportation agencies agree on which projects are needed, and clearly articulate the benefit of implementing these projects. As a result, elected officials, businesses and communities feel more confident that transportation plans and projects have been prudently analyzed and prioritized, which promotes support for investment. Over the past fifteen years, Utah has had the highest per-capita investment in public transportation of any state in the nation. Utah has also recently completed a multi-billion dollar interstate reconstruction project that was funded entirely with State and local funding.

The partner agencies in Utah were among the first in the country to develop SAFETEA-LU compliant RTPs, leading to the development of the 2007 Unified Plan. By collaborating—even in instances where it was not required—significant efficiencies and system performance improvements have been achieved. For example, the MPOs provided funding for UTA park and ride lots not just to relieve their own traffic volumes, but because the lots created efficiencies for UDOT and improved the flow of the overall transportation system. The MPOs also work simultaneously with UDOT and UTA on local corridor projects, rather than receiving input from each agency separately.

The process behind the Unified Plan has strengthened relationships between the participating agencies at every level, from design to engineering to construction, in both urban and rural jurisdictions. The agencies have established a level of trust and developed a framework for collaborating on day-to-day work, which allows them to quickly address any multijurisdictional problems that arise, thereby saving time and money for the state.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The partners emphasize that they do not seek consensus on every point, but rather collaborate on shared goals and objectives. For instance, the MPOs decided to choose several key performance measures that all agencies could measure and find useful, while maintaining separate performance measures in their individual RTPs. This strategy allows each agency to retain individual autonomy while accommodating the unique needs posed by urban and rural jurisdictions.

The partner agencies acknowledge that creating the Unified Plan is made easier because the MPOs represent over 85% of the state's population, which reduces the complexity involved with interagency communication and cooperation. However, they have also learned that even in areas with a small number of agencies, successful



collaboration requires each agency to relinquish the desire to lead and instead trust one another as equal partners with shared credit for their accomplishments.

Viewing the transportation system as a whole that benefits from the improvement of each mode and region has enabled Utah's transportation agencies to create a single vision for state's transportation infrastructure. Utah's Unified Transportation Plan has strengthened community trust (the public, business community, and elected officials) in the partner agencies' recommendations and led to unprecedented consensus on and investment in transportation projects across the state.

