

**VOLUME II, SECTION IX.
VOLUME II SUMMARY**

STRUCTURE AND PROCESS OF TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

In this review of the legislative contexts of regional transportation planning and Metropolitan Planning Organizations, a clear pattern of progression has emerged. From its initial laws promoting and subsidizing the development of extensive national and local highway systems, to its more recent attempts to cultivate regional problem solving, Congress has played a critical role.

In response to the rampant growth and inherent problems created by this developing system, in the 1960's almost sixty years subsequent to the invention of the automobile, Congress began to look to other modes of transportation for an antidote. In addition, for the first time, Congress made receipt of federal funds contingent upon the cooperative planning and development of intermodal systems of transportation by state and local governments. Hence, 3-C planning (continuing, cooperative and comprehensive)—an essential feature of metropolitan transportation planning to this day.

In the 70's and 90's Congress continued to expand its legislation to address the mitigation of problems created by suburban growth and single occupant motor vehicle usage. Significantly, it was not until 1991 that the term "highway" was excised from the titles of "highway" legislation. At that time, by virtue of the enactment of ISTEA, the previously passive roles of MPOs with respect to transportation planning were dramatically changed. They were given authority and control over some categories of federal funds, making them principal players in the planning process. Additionally, provision was made for comprehensive long-range and short-term planning by MPOs in conjunction with their States, to include public participation, as well as to make more meaningful the input of transportation providers and other stake holders. These changes facilitated a more regional intermodal planning process, designed to anticipate and work with the public's insatiable hunger for instant mobility, while balancing the perceived needs with related social, economic, and environmental considerations.

The 1998 enactment of TEA-21 further enhanced the role of MPOs in the field of transportation planning by increasing the amount of federal money over which they have primary responsibility. The act also simplified criteria for preparation of Transportation Improvement Programs and strengthened the connection between land use and transportation planning.

It is within these statutory and regulatory contexts that the formalized regional transportation planning process has evolved. This abundant legislation has provided the checkpoints for the certification process engaged in by the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration and has set the stage for the diverse organizational structures and requirements imposed upon MPOs by their respective states.

While the federal certification process which has derived from this legislation is designed to lend leverage in the enforcement of statutory and regulatory obligations of MPOs, the data examined in the process of this Study evidences some inherent challenges to that process. For example, the information obtained in the certification process is not collated and compiled for purposes of comparison and establishment of best practices. It could be deemed, therefore, to be of somewhat limited value. Additionally, the comments of review teams used in the process do not appear to be entirely reliable. Regardless of these perceived deficiencies, it has been observed that the Comparable MPOs have consistently received unconditional joint certifications from FHWA and FTA, as well as commendations via the Enhanced Planning Review Process.

In response to the directive that the Study compare and contrast the performance of DRCOG with that of analogous MPOs, one of the first tasks completed by the Research Team was to develop a list of objective criteria relating to MPOs and metropolitan areas. It was determined that the criteria most likely to ferret out similar MPOs should include: population size, geographic area, ethnic distribution, per capita income, number of jurisdictions in the MPO region, number of fast-growing jurisdictions per MPO region, sunbelt status, economic distribution, and air quality status.

The initial comprehensive list of potential MPOs was narrowed, based upon the analyses and discussion of the criteria comparison. This review resulted in the ultimate selection of Dallas, Seattle and Phoenix (the “Comparable MPOs”). Additionally, for purposes of exploring the efficacy of establishing multiple MPOs in the Denver area, three metropolitan regions with multiple MPOs were selected using these same criteria. The alternative model MPOs thus selected were Miami-Ft. Lauderdale - Palm Beach and the Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater metropolitan regions in Florida and the Charlotte-Gastonia metropolitan region in North Carolina (the “Alternative MPOs”).

Although their predecessors actually predated the federal government’s mandates relative to regional planning, it was discovered that the Comparable MPOs had all sprung from similar beginnings in the 1960s. This similarity is attributable, no doubt, to the fact that the newly formed organizations were commonly generated in response to changes in existing federal policy.

From both historical and contemporary perspectives, it is noteworthy that the majority of the selected MPOs bear the responsibility for many and diverse regional issues. For example, DRCOG is the regional forum for addressing transportation, air quality, growth and development, water quality, and aging issues, in the Denver area. In the 1980’s its work ranged from contracting for the operation of meal sites for seniors to analyzing the region’s vulnerability to an energy emergency. It also created a task force to address the problem of jail overcrowding and started an elevator/escalator safety inspection program. In addition to serving as the designated transportation planning organization in the metropolitan Phoenix area, MAG is the principal planning agency in the areas of air quality, water quality and solid waste management. The transportation planning engaged in by NCTCOG likewise falls under the greater umbrella of its metropolitan planning responsibility: “to guide the long-range physical, economic, and

human resources development of the region.” PSRC is more circumspect in scope as the result of the Washington State Growth Management Act, which limits its directive to planning functions related to regional transportation and growth management.

It was also discovered that the structures of the Comparable MPOs vary considerably; that variation can be attributed to a number of factors. With the exceptions of the complexity of the structure and its resulting processes, the size of the policy making body, and the institution of population-weighted voting, however, such structural differences do not appear to have a significant impact on MPO work product or effectiveness. In fact, based upon the findings, the MPO’s success depends more directly on factors such as the political culture of the region, the relative strengths of the MPO leaders, staff competence, objectivity, openness and fairness, the nature of the regional issues, and whether or not outcomes of the planning process are perceived as “fair”.

These discoveries relating DRCOG and the Comparable MPOs led to a number of recommendations. For example, it is recommended that one of the first orders of business should be to review and rejuvenate the 1977 Memorandum of Agreement which establishes the charter for the transportation planning process as carried out by DRCOG. To help streamline its process, removing unnecessary complexity and redundancy, it is also recommended that DRCOG consider consolidating its Transportation Committee with its Transportation Policy Committee. Additionally, it should consider instituting full-time weighted voting to allow for more proportionate representation (It is also possible that weighted voting would provide added incentive for achieving consensus.) DRCOG should likewise undertake steps to coordinate both its planning efforts and those of areas just outside of the TMA (Gilpin, Clear Creek, and eastern Adams and Arapahoe counties) more effectively with the Colorado Department of Transportation. Finally, both federal-aid reviews and periodic institutional self-studies should be engaged by DRCOG to assess its processes and assist in the realignment of its goals.

The distinguishing feature of the Alternative MPOs is that they are part of a regional planning system wherein the transportation planning for a single, large metropolitan area falls within the jurisdictional boundaries of *multiple MPOs*. It was discovered that the inherent multiplicity demands a considerable degree of inter-MPO coordination. Additionally, multiple MPO models have been found to be arguably less economically efficient and more diluted in terms of political and economic leverage than single MPOs. Conversely, in the multiple MPO setting, the planning organization is perceived as more responsive to parochial concerns than single, larger MPOs. (Depending upon which camp you are in, this could be considered either a benefit, or a detriment in a system designed to promote regional interests.) Based upon its review of the Alternative MPO models, this Study has concluded that fractionalizing DRCOG into multiple MPOs would be unwise. While a hybrid form, establishing yet another layer of government in an integrated regional MPO, supported by smaller, localized MPOs—might ultimately present a realistic compromise, under the current legislation, its implementation would be difficult, at best. Moreover, in air quality nonattainment or maintenance areas (upon which more stringent transportation planning requirements are imposed), successful

resolution of pollution problems would be more difficult should single MPOs be split into multiple MPOs.