

VOLUME I, SECTION I EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In October 1997, Congress commissioned an independent study of the planning process and organization of the Denver Metropolitan Planning Organization. In addition, as many issues arising in Denver are of common concern to metropolitan areas nationwide, we prepared case studies identifying best practices. We examined the processes and procedures of Metropolitan Planning Organizations [MPOs] in transportation planning, focusing on such issues as need satisfaction, project prioritization, fiscal allocation, and equity and fairness of the decisional process. In particular, we focused on the efficacy of transportation planning in four large metropolitan areas confronted with growth:

- **Dallas-Ft. Worth** (the North Central Texas Council of Governments)
- **Denver** (the Denver Regional Council of Governments)
- **Phoenix** (the Maricopa Association of Governments)
- **Seattle** (the Puget Sound Regional Council)

We also evaluated how well these issues are addressed in the following metropolitan areas served by multiple MPOs:

- **Charlotte** (the Cabarrus/South Rowan County MPO, the Gaston Urban Area MPO, the Rock Hill/York County SC MPO, and Mecklenburg/Union MPO)
- **Miami/Ft. Lauderdale** (the Miami-Dade County MPO, the Broward County MPO, the Palm Beach County MPO)
- **Tampa/St. Petersburg** (the Pinellas County MPO, the Hillsboro County MPO, the Pasco County MPO, and Springhill/Hernando County MPO)

In gathering material for this study, we interviewed several hundred individuals who participate in or observe the MPO process at all levels, including the public, transportation providers, staff, engineers, planners, and federal, state and local government (elected and unelected) officials. We examined the federal and State statutory and regulatory foundations for MPOs, reviewed the long-range regional transportation plans [RTPs] and Transportation Improvement Programs [TIPs] they produce, reviewed State allocations to metropolitan areas and their interaction and cooperation with MPOs, examined federal certification reviews of MPOs, and digested a wealth of literature addressing MPOs, and the broader subjects of transportation planning and equity.

FORMALIZATION OF TRANSPORTATION PLANNING AND EMPOWERMENT OF THE MPOS

Enactment of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 [ISTEA] significantly enhanced the role of MPOs in transportation planning by giving the larger MPOs¹ increased authority in project planning and prioritization in consultation with the State, while requiring the State and local transit providers to cooperate with the MPO on project selection. The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century [TEA-21] further enhanced the importance of the MPOs in the transportation planning process by designating specific funds over which they have allocation responsibility. Thus, beginning in 1991, MPOs were transformed from advisory institutions, into institutions that actually have direct influence over the prioritization and allocation of certain transportation funds in metropolitan areas.

This gave transportation planning a new perspective. The interstate and inter-regional “top-down” highway planning process of the federal and State governments, respectively, and the localized “bottom-up” street and road planning process of the cities and counties, would be coupled with a third regional process which was a bit of both, expanded beyond highways, streets, and roads into a comprehensive transportation planning process that took into account all modes, as well as a number of related social, economic, and environmental issues.

THE ROLE OF MPOS, STATES, & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

It is important to note what federal legislation has done and what it has not. Clearly, it has formalized the regional transportation planning process, involving all stakeholders, including the local cities and counties, the State DOT, the local transit providers, and the public. These procedures are even more stringent and formalized in regions that have air quality attainment problems. Congress recognized that transportation and environmental issues cross jurisdictional lines, and therefore need a regional approach to resolving problems of mobility, congestion, air pollution, and sprawl.

The ability of the MPO to facilitate regional planning depends in large part on the technical competence of its staff, the ability of its leadership to build consensus among diverse participants, and the leadership of local officials and the business community. An important role for MPOs is to build “partnerships” of jurisdictions and constituencies for moving forward on solving regional problems. The regional planning framework provided by MPOs can provide the technical studies and consensus-building processes among local officials enabling support for using state and federal funds from a variety of programs, along with local funds, to achieve broader community goals.

Consensus-building between large and small, central and suburban, counties and cities can consume considerable time and energy. This can be a particularly acute problem for fast-growing regions, where transportation needs can outpace existing

¹ Those classified as Transportation Management Areas, or generally, those with a population of 200,000 or more.

infrastructure and available funding. The formal procedural structure of RTP and TIP development, exacerbated by a need to achieve consensus among diverse participants, necessarily can slow the ability of the MPO to respond quickly to rapidly changing transportation needs. Thus, there is a disjunction between the metropolitan transportation planning process and land development. Better coordination between transportation and land use through county and city comprehensive planning and/or statewide growth management would help to address this problem.

Fewer than half of the respondents we surveyed believe their MPO is able to meet rapidly changing transportation needs. The primary reasons appear to be the inadequacy of funding, and structural problems inherent in the MPO transportation planning process. In Dallas/Ft. Worth, and to a lesser extent in Seattle, those respondents who felt the MPO process was unable to meet rapidly changing transportation needs identified inadequate resources or unattainable tasks as the primary reason; in Denver and Phoenix, the primary reason identified was that the process was excessively complex and time-consuming. Hence, MPOs should work toward simplifying their procedures in a way that does not sacrifice public participation or fairness.

Because the State controls most of the transportation dollars spent in a metropolitan area, it is difficult to assess the success or failure of MPOs in transportation planning. In fact, metropolitan transportation planning is a complex process in which the MPO process is only a component part, for the State DOT, the transit providers, the counties, and cities each play a primary role with respect to those projects within their fiscal and jurisdictional realm.

INSTITUTIONAL AND PROCESS STRUCTURES

The institutional and process structure of MPOs as related to the development of TIPs and RTPs can be extensive, complex, and somewhat cumbersome. There are numerous committees involved in the process, which adds to the time it takes to complete a plan. Only 26% of survey respondents indicated that the institutional structure and decisional process of DRCOG was meeting the long-term transportation needs of the region either very well or adequately well with qualifiers. Together with Phoenix, this was the lowest rating among the MPOs surveyed. Structural/authority problems were identified by 26% of respondents referring to needs not being met because: 1) the MPO does not hold the power to resolve long-term issues or to implement goals, 2) the MPO is not accountable for its actions, 3) the structure and process are inconsistent, or 4) there is a weak relationship with or inadequate support from the state transportation department. Inappropriate focus (not regional, just individual interests; short-term instead of long-term) was identified by 16% of respondents while funding limitations were mentioned by 13%. Numerous respondents indicated dissatisfaction with the size and complexity of the committee structure, though there was no consensus on a single, specific remedy.

Survey results indicate that more respondents in Dallas-Ft. Worth and Seattle agreed that the institutional and process structure in their MPO was meeting long-term transportation needs. In Dallas, for example, 77% of respondents indicated that the

institutional structure and decisional process of the MPO were meeting long-term needs very well. In both the Dallas-Ft.Worth and Seattle MPOs, the more effective institutional structures and decisional processes took a long time to develop. In Dallas, the improvements took place over a ten-year period and required a great deal of effort from the leadership of the MPO to develop a truly collaborative process. The same could also be said of Seattle, where major restructuring efforts were necessary to develop a stronger comfort level within the region concerning the purpose and direction of the MPO.

TRANSPORTATION RESOURCE NEEDS

Analyses were conducted on the amount of funding to Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) projects within each county in the Transportation Management Area (TMA) of Denver and the three other comparable MPOs (Dallas, Phoenix, and Seattle) during the period from 1993 to 2004. Results indicate that the City and County of Denver received the largest TIP funding per capita among the 6 counties in the Denver region, the third largest non-discretionary TIP funding per capita, and the largest funding percentages in relation to percentages of population, vehicle miles traveled (VMT), and lane miles. Based on results from the comparable MPOs in this study, this is not an unusual finding; other central counties also received the largest percentages of TIP funds within their metropolitan regions, typically larger than percentages of population, VMT, or lane miles. Jefferson and Boulder Counties received the smallest funding per capita, as well as percentages of funding that were smaller than percentages of the three need-based proxy measures. Also, across the four MPOs studied, there appears to be no systematic pattern of counties or cities that received funding shares less than what might be expected on the basis of comparative measures. This includes those counties or cities that would be identified as fast-growing.

Even though some need-based inequities were revealed in this analysis, it is important to recognize several other factors when interpreting these results. The degree of daily travel interaction among the counties makes equity analysis at the metropolitan scale more problematic than at other scales of analysis. Furthermore, the selection of projects is based on a competitive process whereby jurisdictions have the opportunity to submit project applications that are scored and given a priority ranking based on criteria that emphasize regional needs. Also, MPOs cannot make any *a priori* allocations based on percentages or formulas.² In light of these points, it is unreasonable to assume that the TIP distribution should exactly reflect distributions based on population, VMT, lane miles, or other criteria. Still, this analysis provides a benchmark. In any individual year, allocations may be “lumpy”, but over the long run there should be a general pattern of equity.

Analyses were also conducted that examined total and percentage of funding received from the State DOTs by the Denver, Dallas, Phoenix, and Seattle MPO regions in comparison to percentages of funds generated, population, vehicle miles traveled, and lane miles attributed to each MPO region within each State. The Dallas-Ft. Worth and Seattle regions are receiving percentages of state and federal funds that their State

² 23 CFR 450.321(1)

Departments of Transportation allocate which compare favorably with their regional shares of the need-based proxy measures. In contrast, Denver and Phoenix are receiving percentages of state and federal funds allocated by their State DOTs that are considerably less than percentages based on the comparative measures.

Noting problems with precisely defining transportation needs, it is difficult to assess whether the distribution of funds allocated by the States to the metropolitan regions is adequately addressing state or regional needs. There are many additional concerns that states must address, over and above concerns with funding based on population, VMT, or lane miles. It is particularly difficult to identify an appropriate “fair share” for metropolitan regions in large Western states with challenging topography and climatic conditions. Still, the patterns of state fund allocation identified are noteworthy in light of results from our survey indicating higher ratings for Dallas-Ft. Worth and Seattle in meeting regional transportation needs.

EVALUATION OF THE MPO PROCESS

The overall pattern of survey responses indicates a moderately positive to strongly positive assessment of the MPOs by their participants. There is, however, a broad range of responses across the MPOs studied. Dallas-Ft. Worth and Seattle rank significantly higher than Denver and Phoenix. The Dallas-Ft. Worth MPO, in particular, is substantially and significantly higher in its rated effectiveness, across a wide range of criteria, and may be considered as engaging in “best practices” among this sample of MPOs.

On the basis of this process evaluation, several key characteristics of successful MPOs were identified as follows:

- 1. Effective Leadership.** The most successful MPOs appear to have leaders with the ability to achieve progressive collaboration and build consensus between individuals with diverse interests, and to fashion regional solutions to common problems. The right combination of leadership attitudes, skills, and capacities can be the most important determinant of whether successful collaboration, or effective regional transportation planning, occurs.
- 2. Staff Competence & Credibility.** The most successful MPOs are characterized by staffs with high levels of technical competence and expertise, able to assist the State DOT and member governments in transportation data collection, modeling, planning and other technical assistance. A technically competent, highly credible staff is one of the most important attributes an MPO can have.
- 3. Regional Ethos.** One of the difficult objectives of MPOs is to create a regional ethos among their elected representatives. Our findings reveal that though most participants believe the elected officials in the MPO process reflect the needs of the metropolitan area as a whole, approximately 40% say the elected officials are more

concerned with their individual needs.³ MPOs should consider several structural means of promoting a more regional approach among their members.

4. **Public Involvement.** The most successful MPOs recognize the importance of, and are aggressive in pursuing, public involvement in shaping priorities of the region. Meaningful public participation in the MPO process enhances the acceptance and support of the transportation projects in the region. Performance goals and funding priorities should result from an inclusive, open, transparent, and fair planning process.
5. **Cooperative Relationship with the State DOT.** The most successful MPOs engage their State DOTs in a cooperative and collaborative decisional process. Both must strive to achieve greater cooperation and collaboration.
6. **Streamlined, Efficient Process.** Among the criticisms levied at the MPO planning and project selection process is that it is unduly cumbersome, time-consuming and laborious. In Denver, among the changes most frequently identified by respondents for implementation was that DRCOG should streamline its decisional process, to eradicate unnecessary complexity.
7. **Land Use.** Our research reveals the importance of integrating land use, air quality, and transportation planning. Because transportation issues are inextricably intertwined with land use issues, MPOs should strive to develop a cooperative process with the state and local jurisdictions to coordinate transportation and land use plans and programs.
8. **Accountability.** The most successful MPOs are noteworthy in hiring and retaining staff members that have the confidence of their membership. Such staff must be accountable to the elected officials and public members who comprise the MPO. Real decision-making power in an MPO must rest with its officers and committee members, for the MPO exists to serve the regional needs of its constituents – the state and local governmental institutions, and the public.

MULTIPLE MPO MODELS

We examined three different metropolitan areas – Charlotte, North Carolina, Southeast Florida and the Tampa Bay area – with multiple MPOs operating within each. The MPO structures and processes in each of these areas were examined in the context of the state statutory environment in which they operate, how they operate locally, and the mechanisms that they have achieved for regional coordination. Among respondents in the multiple MPO regions, 74% felt that multiple MPOs were preferable for their metropolitan area, with higher levels of support for multiple MPOs that had stronger regional coordination mechanisms. Among respondents in the single MPO regions, 73%

³ In Denver, 49% of respondents indicated that participants in the MPO process put their local concerns ahead of regional needs. When asked to identify the one change they believed would improve the MPO process, the largest number identified adoption of a more cooperative, regional approach.

felt that having multiple MPOs operating within the metropolitan area was undesirable. The costs and benefits, which the respondents advance, fall into several broad categories: economies and diseconomies of scale, political and economic equities, and the dynamics of change. Benefits of multiple MPOs include more local-level representation in and access to the process, while the costs include less regional coordination particularly for issues such as air quality, major investment studies, and transit planning.

Results from our survey show that 69% of respondents from Denver felt that having multiple MPOs operating within the metropolitan area was undesirable. Respondents mentioned: 1) that multiple MPOs would create additional administrative burdens, depleting the pool of scarce transportation resources, 2) they would cause increased fractionalization among jurisdictions operating in the same geographical area, and 3) the effects would be harmful to the efforts of improved transportation for the region. Only 9% of Denver respondents felt that multiple MPOs were desirable without qualifiers, while 15% felt that multiple MPOs might be acceptable with qualifiers. Concerns about proportional representation, large size, and not meeting needs of rapidly growing areas were cited as justifications for having multiple MPOs.

EVALUATION OF CURRENT LEGAL ABILITY TO ESTABLISH MULTIPLE MPOS IN A SINGLE METROPOLITAN REGION

The statutory and regulatory requirements for redesignating MPOs have been established to make redesignation a difficult process. MPOs were given authority to conduct region wide transportation planning because there is widespread recognition that metropolitan transportation planning must occur at the regional scale. Allowing local governments easy withdrawal from their MPO would not contribute to the purpose of coordinated regional transportation planning.

On the other hand, the current statutory and regulatory requirements for redesignating MPOs deserve closer scrutiny in light of findings derived from this Study. Currently, redesignation cannot occur unless agreement is reached by officials representing: 1) at least 75% of the affected population, 2) the Governor, and 3) the central city. Results from this study illustrate the importance of establishing fair and equitable structures and processes concerning MPOs. No single local government jurisdiction within the MPO should have unilateral veto authority over such a fundamental structural issue as redesignation. This idea relates directly to one of the principal findings of this Study: the most successful MPOs are collaborative, inclusive organizations that are perceived as fair and equitable to their members. The central city veto over redesignation is perceived as inherently unfair, because it elevates the status of one type of local government over all other local governments in the region. As a result, the central city veto requirement may be detracting from the effort to develop a strong regional ethos among MPO members. Therefore, we recommend that Congress should consider, in conjunction with additional study, removing the statutory requirement concerning central city approval for MPO redesignation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings have lead to conclusions concerning MPOs and their respective regional transportation planning processes, as well as recommendations for the enhancement and hastening of those processes. Among the recommendations made to the federal and state legislatures, departments of transportation, and MPOs are the following:

METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS, IN GENERAL: It is recommended that MPOs create a means of evaluating the leadership qualities of their candidates (both staff and local elected officials) and encourage the leaders selected by virtue of this process to improve their leadership skills by taking advantage of available educational opportunities. Additionally, they should employ and compensate their staffs in a manner that will promote a high level of technical competence and expertise and make professional education available in order to enhance proficiency. Further, they should consider structural means of promoting a more regional approach among their members and aggressively promote public involvement in the shaping of regional priorities. MPOs must, in addition, work in the spirit of cooperation with their state DOTs with respect to all state and local projects and serve as forums for the coordination of regional land use and transportation plans for the state. Finally, MPOs should engage in periodic self-assessment.

DENVER REGIONAL COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS, IN PARTICULAR: In addition to the general recommendations for MPOs, this Study has concluded that it is imperative that DRCOG streamline its decisional process in conjunction with the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and the Regional Transportation District (RTD) by updating the 1977 Memorandum of Understanding and other organic documents and to consider including the following revisions: consolidation of the Transportation Committee with the Transportation Policy Committee, implementation of formalized freight planning, reduction in size of the 49-member Board of Directors, clarification of the Board's mission and role, reapportionment of representation according to population, and institution of full-time weighted voting.

STATE DEPARTMENTS OF TRANSPORTATION IN GENERAL: It is recommended that State DOTs coordinate project selection with MPOs and jointly promulgate guidelines and Long Range Plan [LRP] and Transportation Improvement Program [TIP] criteria. It is also recommended that State DOTs develop open and objective selection processes that more meaningfully include input from local jurisdictions, stakeholders and the public. Additionally, DOTs should promulgate rules and regulations that formalize their project prioritization and planning processes. Emphasis should be placed on collaborative planning in MPO regions relative to project selection, prioritization and timing. DOTs should also periodically evaluate the needs and equity of economic resource distribution across their regions.

COLORADO STATE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION: It has been concluded that, in addition to implementing the recommendations relating to state DOTs in general, CDOT should refine the terms of the 1977 Memorandum of Agreement, in an

effort to eradicate its complexity, redundancy, and antiquity. Also, consideration should be given to redrawing the boundaries of the State's six engineering regions to make one engineering region coterminous with the boundaries of DRCOG counties or with the boundaries of the Denver Transportation Management Area. (This boundary revision should be concurrent with and complementary of the revision of the jurisdictional lines for commission member districts and transportation planning regions recommended to the State legislatures.)

STATE LEGISLATURES: It is recommended that State legislatures strongly encourage the coordination of regional land use plans with transportation planning and consider the passage of growth management acts as is currently done in some States. State legislatures should further reassess size and composition of State transportation commissions upon completion of the census to more equitably apportion representation. Resulting commissions should be made clearly subject to adequate notice, public hearing, and open decisional process requirements. Enabling legislation should be updated, commensurate with the new policies favoring openness of process, enhanced public participation, and seamless intermodalism, and should reemphasize the desirability of continuing, cooperative and comprehensive planning.

US DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION: To reduce inconsistency between statutory and regulatory guidelines, it is recommended that FHWA and FTA jointly promulgate rules implementing major federal transportation legislation within one year of such legislation's enactment. Additionally, FHWA and FTA should collect, assess and analyze the certification and enhanced planning reviews to enable MPOs to assess and improve their respective practices. The Federal Highway Administration [FHWA] and the Federal Transit Administration [FTA] should focus more intently in their certification processes on whether state departments of transportation and local transit providers are fulfilling their statutorily mandated obligations to engage in cooperative transportation planning with local jurisdictions and MPOs.

US CONGRESS: Metropolitan Planning Organizations should continue to serve as an appropriate forum for state and local jurisdictions to resolve regional transportation problems. In light of findings concerning the importance of fairness and equity among local jurisdictions in MPO processes, Congress should consider, in conjunction with additional study, removing the requirement of approval of the central city for MPO designation or redesignation from the statutory criteria.

CONCLUSION

The Study as synopsised in this Executive Summary has been completed in accordance with the terms of the contract with the Colorado Department of Transportation and the Congressional mandate to assess the transportation planning process of the Metropolitan Planning Organization in the Denver metropolitan region. The information gathered and analyzed in the course of its preparation is presented herewith in a three-volume format. The first volume contains the culmination of the

Study: Executive Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations. Volume II embraces the project details, including: project description, federal and state legislative and regulatory contexts, identification of comparable and alternative MPO models, and the relative effectiveness of MPOs, given the discrepancy in institutional structures. The final volume includes research data relative to literature, transportation needs and equity, TIP development and project selection, state fund allocation, statistical analyses of questionnaire responses, and analysis of alternative MPO models and their potential application in the Denver area.