Introduction to Regional Government

During the past 15 years, the Safe Routes to School movement in the United States has grown larger and more sophisticated. In fact, walking and bicycling to school is attracting more and more interest from leaders and decision-makers at the local, regional, state and federal levels. As such, Safe Routes to School practitioners have been expanding their efforts to encompass policy, systems and environmental changes in their work and are quickly expanding their focus from a local one to one with regional, state and national reach. For Safe Routes to School, this has become particularly pertinent with the passage of the new federal transportation act.

Commonly referred to as MAP-21, the law empowers local governments — acting through their regional transportation planning organizations — to open a competitive grant process with a portion of the federal funding that previously went through the state department of transportation for Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements and Recreational Trails, which are now known collectively as Transportation Alternatives (TA). Each state is required to allocate 50 percent of its TA funds to MPOs. MPOs serving a population of at least 200,000 are required to coordinate a competitive grant process for the eligible TA program funds. This new legislation offers an opportunity to better integrate active transportation needs into the regional transportation planning and funding processes.

For practitioners, this is an opportunity to engage MPOs and their local governments — and not just around the allocation of these funds, but also in a larger discussion around additional administration, programs and funding mechanisms that can be leveraged to improve conditions for walking and bicycling in the region. This action brief is designed to provide the Safe Routes to School practitioner with the basic tools to understand the complexities of a MPO’s transportation decisions and procedures. A companion document, “Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Regional Governments,” focuses on informing regional staff and decision-makers on the benefits of Safe Routes to School while sharing best practices in regional decisions, programs and funding that result in more people walking and bicycling to school and in daily life.
Regional Planning

Regional planning became a priority when the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1962 provided conditional funding to urbanized areas with more than 50,000 people with the stipulation that they must undergo regional planning with their local jurisdictions. The injection of the conditional funding not only helped to unify approaches toward making major transportation connections through the region, but also required some consensus on the value and priority of projects.

Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Regional Councils of Government

In order to meet the requirements of the Federal Aid Highway Act and receive funding from the federal Highway Trust Fund to advance regional transportation needs, MPOs were formed in areas with populations of more than 50,000. These MPOs consisted of local elected officials and their staff and focused on addressing funding priorities for highway, safety, security and transit projects.

MPOs are structured many different ways. No one organizational structure is inherently better than the other — local political demands, historical context and current transportation needs usually dictate how each MPO has been formed and administered. Many MPOs are administered by a regional council of governments (COG) or are governed by a board of directors typically comprised of elected officials from the region, relevant state officials and representatives of agencies that oversee various modes of transportation. To make informed decisions, board members often rely on technical committees and staff to provide them with relevant research and information.

MPOs construct the vision for transportation across a region. This includes if a region will focus on automobiles and additional lane miles or whether a region’s transportation system will be diverse and multi-modal. An MPO lays the direction of regional transportation systems through the implementation of a planning process, which includes educating diverse audiences, funding projects and, as directed by MAP-21, measuring performance.

Planning and Funding within MPOs

As an entity, MPOs are required to undertake regular transportation planning processes at the regional level and to develop a 20-year long-range transportation plan (LRTP). Additionally, they develop a three- to five-year transportation improvement program (TIP), which is then incorporated into the state transportation improvement program (STIP). These two regional documents schedule the allocation of federal dollars toward regional projects through an extensive planning process. Ultimately, transportation projects must be included in the TIP to receive federal and state transportation dollars.

While this process works differently within each MPO, MPOs are required to make their planning processes, LRTPs and TIPs public as well as to encourage participation from interested stakeholders. All jurisdictions within the MPO come together to set the priorities within the LRTP and select projects included in the TIP. Transportation planners, which often include bicycle and pedestrian planners, are consulted through the MPO committee process on each jurisdiction’s projects that are included in the LRTP and TIP.

With regard to MAP-21 funding, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) helps state departments of transportation and MPOs interpret and implement the new law by providing guidance on the use of MAP-21 funds at the MPO level.

For local Safe Routes to School supporters, it’s critical to learn more about your local MPO’s approach to planning and funding. Research your MPO via regional and state websites and introduce yourself and offer your expertise to relevant contacts working within your MPO.
What You Can Do

As with most successful work, your success is predicated on your knowledge of the processes and the people involved. Use the following guidance as a starting point for supporting regional bicycle, pedestrian and Safe Routes to School policy:

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<td>» Familiarize yourself with the planning documents and the planning process/timetable available on your MPO’s website. Learn more about your MPO here.</td>
<td>» Review all documents that are publicly available and posted online. Check agendas and handouts to stay abreast of current topics.</td>
<td>» Develop connections with staff and board members to offer expertise and discuss bicycling, walking and Safe Routes to School priorities.</td>
<td>» Align with your jurisdiction’s staff members who sit on MPO committees as well as with members from the community advisory committees. They can keep you up to date on issues or even become vocal educators and supporters for your issues during committee meetings.</td>
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<td>» Attend MPO board meetings, even if there isn’t an agenda item of interest to you.</td>
<td>» Review all documents that are publicly available with regard to technical committees and community advisory committees, which often work on projects before they are brought to the MPO board.</td>
<td>» Inform MPOs about bicycling, walking and Safe Routes to School priorities by participating at relevant MPO committees and engaging decision-makers.</td>
<td>» Invite the MPO and its board members to community bicycling and walking events that you are hosting and include them in the planning of such events.</td>
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<td>» Subscribe to your MPO’s email/social media updates and add them to your update lists.</td>
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<td>» Be persistent. Navigating the internal processes at MPOs can feel overwhelming, but don’t give up.</td>
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Align Talking Points with MPO Priorities.

In addition to providing your MPO staff and board with the companion “Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Regional Governments” action brief, customize your talking points by considering the following priorities of your MPO and how they align with Safe Routes to School priorities.

» If your MPO has the authority to determine transportation funding priorities for the region, then your talking points should describe why Safe Routes to School fits within those priorities.

» If your MPO values connectivity across modes, then your talking points should illustrate how bicycle and walking projects can help realize complete trips to school or other prioritized locations.

» If your MPO has a multi-modal perspective, then your talking points should describe how and why walking and bicycling should be included in their policies and scoring criteria.

» If your MPO values safety and security, then your talking points should describe why bicycling and walking projects should receive their fair share of funding by matching funds to mode and/or traffic-related injury and mortality data.

» MPOs are increasingly considering the connection between transportation and health. In turn, your talking points should show how transportation planning has a major impact on physical activity rates, road safety and overall community health.

» MPOs focus on the attainment of recommended congestion and air quality standards. Your talking points should demonstrate how Safe Routes to School can help achieve these goals.

» MPOs are mandated to involve lower-income communities and other stakeholders in planning. Your talking points should illustrate how Safe Routes to School projects and programs excel at bringing together a wide variety of community perspectives.
Additional Resources

Most MPOs have a Citizen’s Guide to Regional Transportation. Contact your MPO or find the guide on its website. It will be specific to your locale and is a very useful resource. Below are some additional links to resources that will prepare you to get active within your MPO.

How Metropolitan Planning Organizations Plan for and Fund Bicycling and Walking Investments
(Advocacy Advance, 2012)

Creating Healthy Regional Transportation Plans
(TransForm and the California Department of Public Health, 2012)

Regional Transportation Planning for the Atlanta Region
(National Association of Chronic Disease Directors, May 2011)

Guide to the San Francisco Bay Area’s Transportation Improvement Program, or TIP
(Metropolitan Transportation Commission, August 2010)

History of Metropolitan Planning Organizations
(New Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, January 1998)

Transportation Planning Capacity Building
(U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration)

The Transportation Planning Process: Key Issues
(U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, 2007)

Promoting Active Transportation: An Opportunity for Public Health
(American Public Health Association and Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership works to advocate for safe walking and bicycling to and from schools and in daily life, to improve the health and well-being of America’s children, and to foster the creation of livable, sustainable communities.

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