Why Regional Planning and Metropolitan Planning Organizations Matter

Regional planning most often happens at metropolitan planning organizations (MPO). Every metropolitan region with a population over 50,000 has an MPO. These bodies govern transportation planning, funding and policy at a county or multi-county level and historically, have often been less understood than local planning agencies. MPOs vary in power and responsibility, but in every case influence the transportation decisions of their regions in important ways.

Examining the MPOs of Southern California

Both the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) and the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) are MPOs that perform some of the same tasks, such as developing the Regional Transportation Plan and Sustainable Communities Strategies (RTP/SCS) every four years, but their size and ability to directly fund projects diverge dramatically.

Regardless of the size or function of an MPO, they are often the source of important data, funding, planning and policy related to transportation. Some MPOs have incorporated active transportation deeply into their planning process, while others are in the process or have not yet developed the tools to support active transportation planning. When MPOs do incorporate active transportation into their planning processes, it is much more likely that they will increase funding for active transportation projects and encourage local cities to improve conditions for bicycling and walking.

Regional Planning for Active Transportation

One question that is often asked about planning for active transportation at the regional level is, “Isn’t that a local city concern?” While local cities are the final decision makers about what happens on their streets, the policies and funding decisions that happen at the regional level can encourage or discourage the development of active transportation networks. In addition, while individual active transportation projects may not have a large impact on the regional transportation system, the development of bicycle, pedestrian and Safe Routes to School networks

Under MAP-21 the new federal transportation law, MPOs receive a share of Transportation Alternative funds. How these funds are used can vary widely between MPOs and county transportation commissions. Research from Los Angeles County has also shown that relatively few cities spend their local dollars on active transportation projects. They instead utilize their local dollars to leverage additional federal and state funds for active transportation. How MAP-21 funds are distributed by MPOs will influence the types of projects that are built by local cities.

Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG)

- 6 counties
- 191 cities
- 18 million people
- Develops 30-year RTP/SCS
- SCAG has little direct funding authority and instead distributes funds to each of the six County Transportation Commissions (CTCs)

San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)

- 1 County
- 18 Cities
- 3 million people
- Develops 30 year RTP-SCS
- SANDAG has direct funding authority and builds and constructs a variety of transportation related projects, including bicycle and pedestrian projects
and programs do have the capacity to influence regional issues such as congestion, public health, greenhouse gas emissions, air quality and public safety.

MPOs perform a number of important functions that can influence how transportation dollars are spent.

- **Modeling**: MPOs are responsible for transportation modeling which is used to justify investments in specific transportation projects. Without strong activity based models that can accurately predict the number of trips taken by active transportation it is difficult to justify increasing dollars for these modes. MPOs can also help create valuable data resources for local cities by including active transportation objectives into surveys, data collection efforts and projections.

- **Policy**: Complete Streets policies and other active transportation policies at the regional level can ensure that any project funded through the regional agency improves conditions for biking and walking.

- **Planning**: MPOs are often responsible for planning large transportation projects or providing planning grants to their local jurisdictions. Through this function they can influence how cities develop their transportation plans and projects.

- **Funding**: MPOs have a large amount of discretion to spend federal and state transportation dollars on projects as they see fit. Through call for projects or other planning efforts MPOs can determine how much of their funding is devoted to bicycle, pedestrian and Safe Routes to School projects and programs.

- **Collaboration**: One of the most important functions of a regional government is to ensure that local jurisdictions coordinate in the development of transportation projects. While most active transportation projects don’t cross city boundaries, MPOs can develop the overarching vision for a region.

**Developing Regional Active Transportation Goals**

Making the case for increased active transportation funding and improved planning at the regional level is best done with a broad coalition of supporters. During the development of the 2012 SCAG RTP/SCS a wide range of partners were gathered to comment on a range of issues. These included public health representatives, environmental groups, transit supporters, advocates of affordable housing and transit oriented development and elected officials from cities that were interested in expanding their active transportation networks.

Thinking ahead to future RTP/SCS cycles has also proved invaluable for the work that is happening in Southern California. During the 2012 RTP/SCS cycle there were many unanswered questions regarding the appropriate level of funding, how much active transportation strategies could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by, what the monetary value of improvements in public health would be and how much local cities were already spending out of their own general funds on active transportation. Regional governments and MPOs are uniquely suited to develop the types of projections and modeling scenarios that are needed to make the case for additional bicycle and pedestrian funding since they often possess the modeling capabilities and staff expertise.

**Components of a Regional Active Transportation Policy Platform**

A regional Active Transportation program can focus on many different programs and policies. Below is a list of policies and programs that are currently being focused on by SCAG and SANDAG in Southern California.

**Sustainable Transportation Demonstration Program or Early Action Program**

This program will develop a project list of high priority Regionally Significant Active Transportation Projects to be included in future long-range planning efforts. The development of this program can also create cost estimates for future funding allocations.

**Countywide Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan**

This strategy can be used to help local communities establish new Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs and to sustain and enhance existing efforts. In addition to standardizing and coordinating local programs, this plan can be used to project project costs on a region wide scale and inform future budgeting decisions.
First Mile/Last Mile Planning
Bicycle and pedestrian connections to transit are a key strategy to increase transit ridership and reduce the need for expensive parking structures adjacent to transit stations. Such planning efforts can outline key infrastructure improvements and provide cost estimates for future projects. A First Mile/Last Mile plan can also inform the construction of future stations and recommend that bicycle and pedestrian projects within a defined radius of the station be included in the construction costs for the station.

Countywide Complete Streets Policy
A Countywide Complete Streets policy would apply to projects that receive funding from the regional agency. Such policies are the most cost effective means of ensuring that all future projects improve safety for bicyclists and pedestrians.

Project Evaluation Criteria/Performance Measurement and Monitoring
The criteria used to rank and select projects by regional agencies determine what types of projects get built. Criteria can include Equity, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Public Health Benefits, Cost Benefit Analysis, and Public Safety. The federal government is also developing performance metrics that will influence the types of projects that are built in the future. Most regional MPOs also adopt performance measures as part of their RTPs. These can be valuable tools for monitoring the progress made by regional agencies between plans.

Land Use Considerations
Land use planning is directly connected to the transportation decisions that people make. In California, all MPOs are required to adopt a Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) when they adopt their RTPs. The SCS requires MPOs to incorporate land use planning into their transportation planning to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Health Impact Assessments/Metrics
Public Health expertise is rare at MPOs. Some are now developing the ability to model the negative health impacts from transportation projects. Conducting a Health Impact Assessment of a Regional Transportation plan can be particularly informative if it can show the costs and benefits of alternative scenarios. Active transportation projects score highly when measured based on public health metrics because they increase hours of physical activity and reduce collisions.

Expand Funding for Active Transportation
Many regions spend only a tiny fraction of their transportation dollars on active transportation improvements despite the fact that bicycling and walking often make up a relatively large percentage of trips and injuries and fatalities. By expanding funding for active transportation funding regions can meet many of their sustainability and public health goals. In addition, the type of money that regions use for their active transportation projects can influence the ability of local jurisdictions to implement projects quickly and efficiently. Local sales tax dollars and state funding are often much easier to use than federal funds. By prioritizing federal Transportation Alternatives funds to larger projects and prioritizing local funds to smaller projects, regions and expedite the number of projects that are built.

Expand Technical Assistance for Local Cities
Many jurisdictions have seen a reduction in their planning staff due to lack of revenues. Smaller and low income cities also often suffer from a lack of expertise. MPOs and regional governments often can help facilitate improvements in existing processes or can provide small cities with the assistance they need to complete plans or projects.

Develop a List of Shovel Ready Projects
MPOs often don’t have a list of priority active transportation projects available when federal or state grants become available. This lack of preparation can result in regions allocating more money to other modes and can be prevented through comprehensive planning.

Support all the E’s
Behavior change can be a slow process without funding for encouragement and educational activities. Recently in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Metro allocated $2 million per year for open streets events like CicLAvia. Metro has also begun to sponsor bicycle safety classes across the county.