

The Role of MPOs in Advancing Safe Routes to School through the Transportation Alternatives Program

In 2012, Congress made changes to Federal funding for Safe Routes to School that gave some metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), which are regional transportation planning authorities, decision-making authority over which projects to fund. Given these changes, it is important to examine the impact of the role of MPOs on the availability of funding for Safe Routes to School initiatives and to identify best practices. This informational brief explains the changes in the law and profiles selected MPO approaches to support Safe Routes to School projects under this new construct.



Congress Makes Changes

Congress passed a new transportation law called Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) in 2012. This law incorporated the Federal Safe Routes to School program within a new program called the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP).

Until that point, the Federal Safe Routes to School program was implemented by each State's department of transportation (DOT). All States chose to implement Safe Routes to School, with nearly all implementing it as a State-run competitive grant program that supported infrastructure projects like sidewalks, crosswalks, and shared use paths, as well as noninfrastructure projects including traffic enforcement, encouragement activities, and safety education.

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With the enactment of MAP-21 and the new Transportation Alternatives Program, many changes were made that affected how Safe Routes to School projects were funded. Specifically:

- Safe Routes to School projects must compete alongside a range of other types of bicycling, walking, trail, historic preservation, and environmental mitigation projects, instead of having guaranteed funding set aside.
- Funding for TAP was cut by 30 percent (compared to the previous combined funding for the Transportation Enhancement Activities, Recreational Trails Program, and Safe Routes to School), and States are also allowed to shift up to half of the funding to other transportation projects and priorities.



- Local communities looking for funding for Safe Routes to School projects can no longer receive 100 percent Federal share for the project and must instead identify State or local matching funds for up to 20 percent of project costs (a lower match may be required in some Western States).

In addition, and most relevant for this brief, decision-making about which TAP projects to fund is split between States and MPOs representing large urbanized areas. State DOTs still choose some projects throughout the State and all projects in rural and mid-sized areas. But, MPOs for urbanized areas with more than 200,000 people now administer their own TAP competitions and choose the projects within their region. Altogether, nearly 200 MPOs around the country control more than \$200 million of TAP money each year – approximately one-quarter of available funds.

MPOs as Decision-Makers

Prior to MAP-21, schools and local governments in nearly all States applied directly to the State DOT for support and funding with little involvement from MPOs. In their new role as gatekeepers to TAP funding, large MPOs have the authority to determine which types of active transportation projects, including Safe Routes to School, receive funding. MPOs now make many decisions about how to administer TAP that affect whether or not Safe Routes to School projects are competitive—such as the funding priorities, what type of scoring criteria are used, how schools are notified about the availability of funding, whether funding is set aside for Safe Routes to School projects and more.

Given that many MPOs were not previously involved in Safe Routes to School initiatives or funding selections, this new role has required a steep learning curve. The following four MPOs have taken full advantage of the new flexibility provided to them under TAP to ensure that projects beneficial to their region are supported. Each has a unique approach that has helped ensure that Safe Routes to School projects were well-represented in the projects selected for TAP funding, and can serve as best practices for other MPOs around the country.

Maricopa Association of Governments: Dedicating Funding for Safe Routes to School Noninfrastructure Projects

The Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) represents nearly 4 million people spread across 27 towns and cities and three tribal communities in the Phoenix metropolitan area of Arizona. While the first two years of TAP funds were used for projects previously approved before MAP-21 was enacted, MAG wanted input on how to use TAP funds starting with FY 2015 money.

Given the scale of its membership, MAG's first step was to survey the cities and towns that belong to the MPO. Approximately 75 percent of survey respondents, the third highest response, wanted TAP money to be used for Safe Routes to School projects and suggested allocating nearly 30 percent of TAP funds to Safe Routes to School infrastructure and noninfrastructure projects.

The results from the survey guided MAG in establishing three exclusive priorities for TAP projects: improving bicycle and pedestrian access and connectivity, improving safety for bicycling and walking, and making bicycling and walking to school safer and more desirable. MAG also opted to set aside \$200,000 per year – later increased to \$400,000 – just for Safe Routes to School noninfrastructure projects, including both the development of safety assessments and plans as well as staffing and expenses related to encouragement or education activities.

Once the priorities were set, MAG developed an infrastructure application and scoring factors that prioritized projects based on safety improvements, connectivity, proximity to schools, and other factors. A separate application and scoring criteria were developed specifically for Safe Routes to School noninfrastructure projects to assess a project's sustainability, partnerships, and safety needs. MAG created a new measure to evaluate the need at the school, asking applicants to count how many children were crossing major intersections near the school at peak times, how many vehicles per hour were on nearby roads, and the posted speed limits.

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MAG went to great lengths to ensure that the availability of funds was widely publicized to schools and local governments. It contacted every school and connected them with the appropriate city or town lead so they could coordinate on applications. It also did a preapplication workshop to help interested applicants understand how to apply.

In the competition held in 2013 for infrastructure funding, 18 of the 33 projects submitted would have benefitted a K-8 school within the project limits. The ratio is even greater for awarded projects: 11 of 13 projects selected for funding have a direct impact on a K-8 school within the project boundaries. For noninfrastructure, three Safe Routes to School projects have been funded across two competitions in 2014 totaling nearly \$350,000. A new competition closed in May 2015 with nearly \$800,000 available for Safe Routes to School activities and safety studies.

Looking back on their experience implementing TAP, MAG Transportation Planner Alex Oreschak highly recommended their approach of a separate competition for Safe Routes to School noninfrastructure projects as there are different agency champions, scoring, and purposes for each. He further commented that a standalone competition prevents agencies from having to choose between submitting an expensive infrastructure project and a less flashy, yet important Safe Routes to School encouragement or planning project. MAG Safety Engineer Margaret Boone indicated that their member agencies have been very supportive of their new focus on school safety.



Metropolitan Transportation Commission: Doubling Down on Regional Safe Routes to School Priorities

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) covers the 9 counties in the San Francisco Bay area—with 101 municipalities, 7,000 square miles, and 7 million people. Prior to MAP-21, Safe Routes to School initiatives were already an established priority of MTC, with \$5 million available each year from a regional Climate Initiatives program intended to reduce vehicle emissions from travel to school. The creation of TAP funding—which the State of California combined with other State funding sources and named the Active Transportation Program—gave MTC an opportunity to reinforce its Safe Routes to School initiative within the funding priorities.

While MTC used the State's Active Transportation Program application for its 2014 regional TAP competition, it also created additional scoring criteria for projects in its region. Up to ten points were available for projects consistent with regional priorities – which included Safe Routes to School projects, projects that would increase active transportation, and multijurisdictional projects, among others. In addition, because State funding sources were included along with TAP, MTC had the option to waive local matching requirements on certain projects. It chose to waive the match on projects it wanted to encourage: any project within a Community of Concern, which is a regional designation for disadvantaged communities with a significant concentration of low-income or minority populations, plus any Safe Routes to School or other noninfrastructure projects.

MTC chose 11 projects totaling \$31 million to support. Nearly half—5 projects totaling \$15 million—were Safe Routes to School projects.

With the application and scoring criteria completed, MTC used its email list to notify all its government agencies about the funding opportunity. In addition, it held several workshops to help potential applicants understand how to develop a competitive application.

In the first competition, held in 2014, applicants submitted a total of 127 applications requesting \$201 million, of which 49 were for Safe Routes to School projects. MTC chose 11 projects totaling \$31 million to support. Nearly half—5 projects totaling \$15 million—were Safe Routes to School projects. A second competition using similar scoring criteria has been announced with projects to be selected by the end of 2015.

Sean Co, a MTC Transportation Planner during the adoption of the TAP project application and scoring criteria, pointed out the importance of reviewer selection in awarding good projects. MTC engaged staff from public agencies that had expertise in bicycle, pedestrian, or health issues, and made sure they were familiar with regional priorities, including Safe Routes to School infrastructure and noninfrastructure projects. Because MTC and the State of California used the same application, scores were assigned both by reviewers from around the State as well as the MTC-selected reviewers. While MTC only used the scores of its regional reviewers to select its projects, Co noted that the scores assigned by State reviewers were significantly different from the MTC reviewers, showing the importance of taking into account regional priorities in the application and scoring.

Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada: Sustaining the School System's Commitment to Safe Routes to School

The Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada (RTCSNV) covers the 8,000 square mile Clark County, with most of the 2 million residents concentrated in the urbanized Las Vegas Valley. There are 4 large local government jurisdictions, 2 small jurisdictions, and one school system—the Clark County School District, which is the fifth-largest school district in the country—within RTCSNV's jurisdiction.





In the past, RTCSNV worked closely with the Clark County School District, which received funding from the State DOT to support a Safe Routes to School coordinator, by helping with walk audits to identify infrastructure needs, offering bicycle safety skills training for students and teachers, and studying the impact of bicycling and walking projects near schools. Another key partner in this work was the Southern Nevada Health District, which received funding through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to increase active transportation to help address obesity.

Prior to the enactment of MAP-21, RTCSNV had just started working with the State to select projects under the old Transportation Enhancements program, which funded a variety of bicycling and walking projects. With the creation of TAP, RTCSNV had to modify its process to incorporate Safe Routes to School and other eligibility changes enacted by MAP-21. RTCSNV had a meeting with stakeholders, including representatives from the health department and the school system, to provide input into the new TAP application and scoring process. There was consensus among the stakeholders that Safe Routes to School and school safety had been important in the area and should continue as a priority in this new program.

RTCSNV's Director of Planning Raymond Hess noted that Safe Routes to School noninfrastructure submissions scored particularly well on the readiness factor and community support factor.

Based on stakeholder input, RTCSNV developed an application that had four project types: nonmotorized infrastructure (including Safe Routes to School infrastructure projects), Safe Routes to School noninfrastructure, community improvement projects, and environmental projects. All projects, no matter the type, were assigned up to 50 points for readiness, need, and support for the project. Each project type was also then scored on criteria specific to that type, with up to 50 points available. For example, nonmotorized infrastructure projects were scored for things like multiagency collaboration, proximity to schools or high-density populations, and filling gaps in the nonmotorized system. Safe Routes to School noninfrastructure projects were assessed on past experience implementing Safe Routes to School initiatives, supportive policies or plans, and involvement of multiagency partners.

In the competition held in 2013, 16 projects totaling \$9.7 million were submitted for TAP funding, of which 5 were Safe Routes to School infrastructure projects and one was a Safe Routes to School noninfrastructure project to support a coordinator. After applications were scored, 10 projects totaling \$5.4 million—including all six Safe Routes to School projects—were selected for funding.

RTCSNV's Director of Planning Raymond Hess noted that Safe Routes to School noninfrastructure submissions scored particularly well on the readiness factor and community support factor. For infrastructure projects, RTCSNV wanted to get the most "bang for the buck," making sure that infrastructure projects connected people to destinations, like schools. Due to how the application and scoring criteria were set up, RTCSNV was able to align selected TAP projects with their long-range transportation plans.

North Central Texas Council of Governments: Incentivizing School Systems and Cities to Collaborate on Land Use Planning

The North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) is responsible for the greater Dallas/Fort Worth area, which includes 230 local governments, 127 school districts, and almost 7 million people spread across 16 counties. With so many jurisdictions, a key challenge in the region is lack of coordination between school districts and local governments on the location of schools, which impacts transportation and safety. NCTCOG saw an opportunity to use TAP to incentivize more collaboration between school districts and cities.

After examining the various eligibilities in TAP, NCTCOG chose to only fund three types of projects: active transportation infrastructure, safety and access to schools (i.e. Safe Routes to School projects), and urban Complete Streets boulevards. The Council reviewed these priorities with stakeholders through public

meetings and workshops, at which participants expressed support. These priorities were reflected in the scoring criteria. For example, up to 20 points were assigned based on the project's ability to improve access to schools, workplaces, or shopping and for alignment with Safe Routes to School plans or master plans. Another 15

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points were focused on the project's ability to improve safety and another 10 points for proximity to key destinations like schools.

NCTCOG had another tool at its disposal to encourage Safe Routes to School applications: the region had hundreds of millions of dollars in tolling credits that could be used to offset local matching requirements for certain projects. It chose to set aside up to \$2 million in tolling credits specifically for school safety and access projects submitted through TAP, which helped ensure that disadvantaged communities could apply as well. The Council worked hard to spread the word about the TAP funding: it gathered contact information for school board presidents and superintendents for the 127 school districts in their jurisdiction and sent letters and emails to each to invite them to apply. Similar outreach went to all local governments to encourage them to coordinate with their school districts.





The Regional TAP call for projects in 2014 attracted 47 applications totaling \$61 million in federal funding, including 15 school safety and access projects worth \$8 million. After scoring and review, 33 projects totaling \$38 million were funded with \$28.4 million from TAP and \$9.8 million from CMAQ—including 13 school safety and access projects.

Building on the TAP focus on school access and safety, NCTCOG applied for and was awarded a Federal TIGER planning grant in late 2014 to improve coordination between school districts and cities. Through the grant, NCTCOG is creating a planning subcommittee to enhance school and city coordination and is developing a manual for cities and school districts to support collaboration on school siting, transportation needs, safety, and land use. It will also implement several pilot projects focused on Safe Routes to School planning, school siting, and land use. NCTCOG is considering having two separate TAP competitions in the future, with one just for Safe Routes to School projects that would require collaboration between school systems and local governments on land use planning. Separating out the Safe Routes to School competition would ensure that jurisdictions didn't have to choose between a Safe Routes to School project or another kind of TAP project when applying. The funded school safety and access projects included several miles of sidewalks and shared use paths, on-street bikeways, a pedestrian bridge, and traffic signal and crosswalk improvements to enhance safety for area schools.

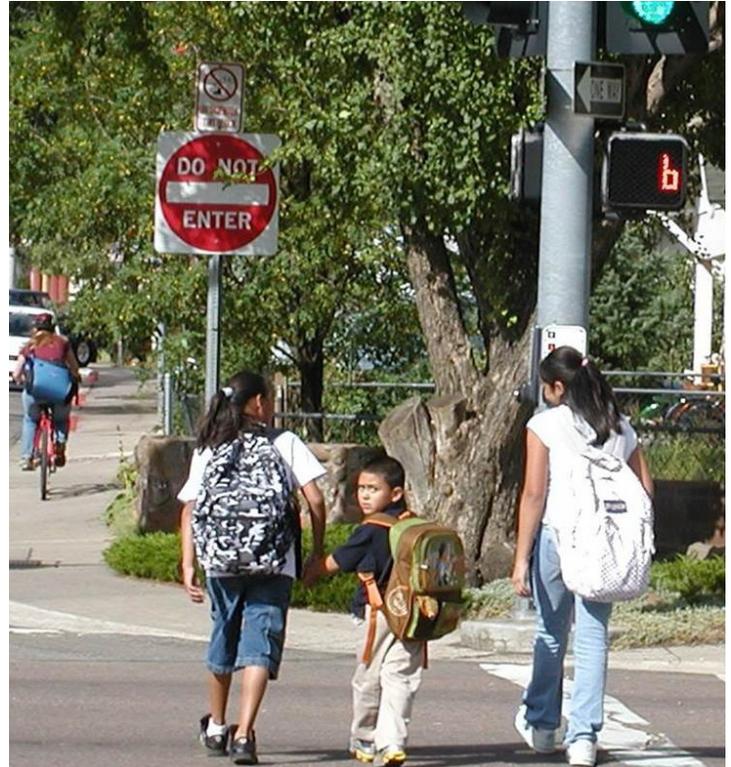
NCTCOG Program Manager Karla Weaver indicated that TAP has improved its ability to work with communities more closely to ensure that funded projects are coordinated with land use decisions. She called out the importance of building the application criteria and scoring so that it would generate applications and funded projects in line with the region's priorities and needs.

Key Takeaways

Based on the experiences of the highlighted MPOs, Safe Routes to School projects can flourish in regional TAP competitions. While each situation was different, it is noteworthy that in all cases, the MPOs carefully considered how Safe Routes to School projects fit within the needs of their communities and then crafted applications and scoring criteria that enabled Safe Routes to School projects to better compete with other types of projects.

The case studies revealed additional noteworthy practices that could be considered by other MPOs interested in ensuring that an appropriate portion of TAP funds support Safe Routes to School projects. These practices could also be beneficial to Safe Routes to School supporters and advocates interested in encouraging their MPO's TAP processes to be more inclusive of Safe Routes to School projects.

- Ensure that MPO staff understand the role Safe Routes to School projects can play in the region's safety, congestion, and health priorities; visit local schools during arrival and dismissal; and discuss challenges and opportunities with school leaders.
- Hold hearings or seek input from stakeholders to better understand the interests and priorities of constituents.
- Use the information gathered from stakeholders to develop applications and scoring criteria that are aligned with regional priorities—thus ensuring that funded projects will advance regional transportation plans and needs.
- Consider how Safe Routes to School noninfrastructure projects differ from the other infrastructure projects and create special funding categories, criteria, or applications just for noninfrastructure to ensure it is not overlooked.
- Use the TAP competition to encourage collaboration among school districts and local governments, including health departments.



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These practices will help ensure that TAP is inclusive of Safe Routes to School, while also laying the groundwork for MPOs, local governments, and schools to productively collaborate and share information that will ensure the region's transportation needs—including those affecting the trip to school—are addressed.



This resource was developed by the Safe Routes to School National Partnership for the National Center for Safe Routes to School. For more resources and information on Safe Routes to School, please visit the National Center for Safe Routes to School web site at www.saferoutesinfo.org and the Safe Routes to School National Partnership web site at www.saferoutespartnership.org.