



METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS & HEALTH 101: THE NUTS & BOLTS OF REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION AGENCIES



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Executive Summary

This report provides an introduction to **metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs)** for those who want to **influence regional planning to benefit health, active transportation, and equity**. The report details the structure of MPOs, the relationship between MPOs and other agencies and organizations, and the roles that MPOs play, with a focus on how MPOs can support equitable communities. The report describes key processes that MPOs manage and participate in, ways to get involved, and strategies for health and equity stakeholders to influence MPOs. A companion report, [Metropolitan Planning Organizations & Health 201: Best Practices & Promising Opportunities for Health](#), delves into detail regarding innovative strategies and promising practices that MPOs are taking to advance health.



Section 1

INTRODUCTION

In this report, we provide an introduction to metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), agencies that play a key role in regional transportation planning and investments. Creating healthier communities requires both bold vision and a firm grasp on how to make change. In order to understand how to create a healthy and sustainable transportation system, we need a detailed understanding of the intricate maze of agencies, policies and rules, and funding flows that can either trap neighborhoods in an unhealthy quagmire or transform them into vibrant and healthy places.

By demystifying the role of and processes overseen by MPOs, we aim to enable community members, advocates, and stakeholders to influence regional planning to benefit health, active transportation, and equity. This report describes the structure of MPOs, the relationship between MPOs and other agencies and organizations, the roles that MPOs play, and how MPOs affect health and equity in our communities.

What are MPOs? The short answer is that MPOs are urban regional planning entities that are mandated by federal law but established by the states. The longer answer is provided by the remainder of this report. Section 2 of the report sets out what MPOs are, how they are established, and what role they play in relation to the variety of other regional entities that exist. Section 2 also provides background on the origins of MPOs, and the role that MPOs have played in relation to transportation planning decisions that tore apart many urban communities of color in the fifties and sixties. Section 3 describes the structure and governance of MPOs, noting the decision-making role of the MPO policy board and the roles of staff and advisory committees, and providing an overview of bylaws and funding for MPOs. Section 4 explains what MPOs' duties and activities are. This section describes the core transportation planning requirements that are assigned by federal law and the key documents that must be produced by MPOs as a function of those duties.

The section also explains additional duties that MPOs serving larger population regions must comply with, as well as a number of additional federal duties imposed upon all MPOs. The section finishes with a description of duties that may be imposed upon MPOs by state law or that an MPO may choose to take upon itself. Section 5 concludes the report, describing how stakeholders can influence MPOs.

Why try to understand MPOs? **More than 70 percent of people in the United States live in urban areas that are within the jurisdiction of MPOs.** Each MPO plays an essential role in planning for its region's future and in investing transportation funds to achieve those plans. MPOs direct investment of billions of dollars annually. Not only are MPOs involved in major decisions about large-scale transportation projects such as highways and light rail that may have significant impacts on transportation in a region, but they also have the potential to encourage and lead regional and local decisions that prioritize walking and biking. MPOs oversee processes that affect not only transportation decisions, but also economic growth, land use patterns, preservation of natural areas and farmland, air quality, racial and economic equity for community members, safety, and more. This report seeks to remove the mystery from MPOs, enabling advocates and stakeholders who care about healthy communities to engage with and influence these immensely important entities.

Section 2

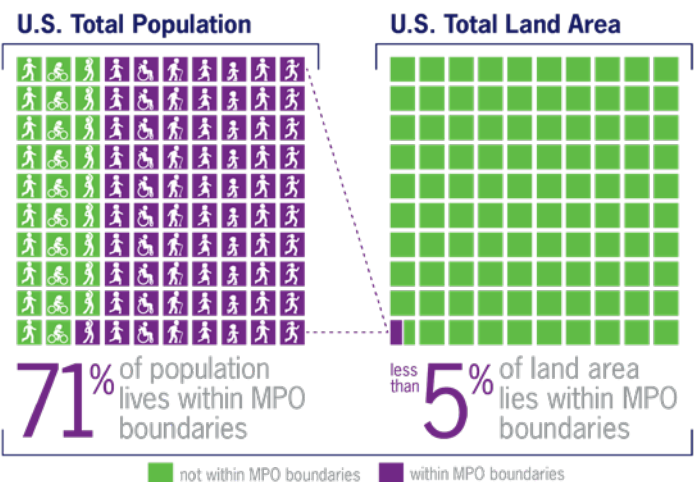
WHAT IS A METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION?

MPOs are a type of regional planning organization. Federal law requires that states establish MPOs for any urbanized area with a population of over 50,000 people.¹

As a result, MPOs are federally mandated and funded, and receive many of their roles and duties through federal statutes or regulations, but the actual establishment or designation of MPOs occurs through state action.

Federal law distinguishes between MPOs in larger areas and smaller areas. MPOs in larger regions with populations over 200,000 people (regions known as Transportation Management Areas) have more duties, whereas MPOs in areas with populations between 50,000 and 200,000 have fewer duties. There are currently approximately 404 MPOs in the United States, of which around 150 MPOs serve larger Transportation Management Areas and 254 MPOs serve smaller areas.² The area within the boundaries of an MPO varies significantly depending upon the size and nature of the metropolitan area. Some MPOs' jurisdictions are smaller than a county, covering only the more populous area within a county; other MPOs' regions consist of multiple counties. In areas with a multicounty metropolitan region, an MPO's jurisdiction may contain several major cities. In addition, an MPO may be an interstate entity, when an urban area lies on the border of more than one state and the metropolitan area has a significant presence in multiple states. There are around 40 MPOs with jurisdiction in multiple states, and there are five MPOs that have jurisdiction in three states.³

Significantly, 71 percent of the US population lives within an urbanized area and thus is under the jurisdiction of an MPO, but less than five percent of US land area lies within MPO boundaries.⁴



A. How MPOs Are Established

Every ten years, following the completion of the decennial census, the Census Bureau uses the updated data to designate a new list of urbanized areas. *Urbanized area* is an official term that refers to densely settled areas with at least 50,000 residents.⁵ Because federal transportation legislation mandates an MPO for each urbanized area of more than 50,000 people, when new urbanized areas are added to the census's list, new MPOs must be established or the jurisdiction of existing MPOs must be expanded. For example, the 2010 updates resulted in 36 new urbanized areas and 27 new Transportation Management Areas requiring MPOs with the additional responsibilities described above.⁶ Based upon the 2010 designations, there are 486 urbanized areas requiring

Some readers may be more familiar with the concept of a metropolitan statistical area, a term used by the Office of Management and Budgets, than an urbanized area. These terms describe similar concepts and areas, with urbanized areas forming the center of metropolitan statistical areas.⁸

MPOs, and 150 MPOs that serve Transportation Management Areas.⁷ There are fewer than 486 MPOs because many MPOs have jurisdictions that encompass multiple urbanized areas.

MPOs have planning jurisdiction within the area that is designated the metropolitan planning area.⁹ That area is determined by agreement between the MPO and the state governor, and must include at least the entire existing urbanized area, as well as contiguous areas that are expected to become urbanized within the next 20 years.¹⁰ For convenience and consistency, many metropolitan planning areas receive the same boundaries as the relevant metropolitan statistical area.

Origin of MPOs

The entities we now know as MPOs evolved over the course of a number of federal efforts to encourage coordinated regional planning in the fifties and sixties. Before midcentury, states and cities undertook transportation planning separately and focused on different goals. State and federal transportation investments prior to the sixties were focused on rural connectivity and highway development. In the fifties, desperate to steer federal funding investments to urban areas, cities joined highway planning efforts, but had little say in the investment of funds, largely allowing state officials to control decision making, including determining placement of urban highways.¹¹

However, the federal government began to see regional planning as crucial to meet massive regional transformations that were in

motion: the mandate to build the Interstate Highway System, the need to coordinate highway planning in urban areas, and the unfolding development of rural areas into suburbs. Early Congressional action took place through the Housing Act of 1954, which made federal grants available for areas to engage in regional planning.¹² In response to these grants, around 100 disparate metropolitan planning bodies formed in different regions during the fifties.¹³

Regional transportation planning took a decisive step forward under the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962, which created a federal requirement for urban transportation planning by conditioning federal funding for urbanized areas with more than 50,000 people upon the stipulation that they must conduct a regional planning process with their local jurisdictions. 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, these areas worked to form regional planning committees that included state and local representation. The required planning process was to be continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive, a set of requirements known as three-C planning.¹⁴

By 1970, 270 urbanized areas were engaged in three-C planning, but requirements were vague and efforts were inconsistent. As a result, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1973 provided clearer requirements for local decision making and set out a formal definition of MPOs. The numerous established regional planning entities generated by earlier efforts were generally able to take on the new designation of MPO.¹⁵



The Racially Charged Origins of MPOs

Racial stratification and oppression have been ongoing features of governance and lived experience in the United States. **It comes as no surprise that the vision of a more modern, scientific, clean, and segmented world that drove federal highway and urban policy in the fifties and sixties was racialized from the start.**

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962, regarded as the genesis of MPOs, occurred in the context of an array of federal programs aimed at remaking urban areas, including urban renewal. Federal policies during the fifties and sixties both pushed and reflected national trends, including not only racial segregation in housing and education, but also related developments such as suburbanization, concentration of poverty, and increasing car ownership. The tools of blight removal and federal interstate highway placement were powerful mechanisms used to destroy many existing communities of color, often decimating vibrant thriving neighborhoods that were African American, Latino, or multiracial and multiethnic.

Threats to destroy urban neighborhoods generated ferocious opposition, sometimes successful. By the late fifties, coalitions of community members, elected officials, civic groups, and academics were increasingly organized and vociferous in their opposition to such efforts.¹⁶ By the time of the proposal of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962, President Kennedy had expressed concern that 15,000 families and 1,500 businesses were being displaced by interstate highway construction each year.¹⁷ One effect of this consciousness was a provision in the new transportation bill for relocation assistance for displaced families and businesses.

The destruction of communities of color sometimes occurred as part of a deliberate effort to remove them,¹⁸ but other times occurred simply because these communities were seen as expendable and deemed to lack sufficient political power to resist the adamant determination of the powerful highway industry and local officials to create highways through densely populated urban areas.

Over the course of the sixties, efforts to build highways and expressways through urban communities generated increasing opposition by local communities and business owners. While many highways cut thriving neighborhoods in half, separated communities by race, or displaced enormous numbers of residents of color, other similar proposals were defeated.¹⁹ As efforts mounted to resist displacement and to obtain equitable access to the benefits of metropolitan development, **MPOs and regional planning efforts came to be seen in a complex light: as both solution-oriented reaction to, but also sometimes contributor to, the challenges of segregation, metropolitan fragmentation, lack of community input, and inequitable access to opportunity.** Today, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and a 1994 Executive Order on environmental justice²⁰ require that MPOs ensure that their actions avoid putting a disproportionate burden on low-income communities and communities of color, a goal that is unevenly achieved.



B. Understanding MPOs in Relation to Other Regional Entities

When an MPO is established in a state, it may occur through: (1) creation of a new standalone agency, (2) assigning an existing agency to provide some level of hosting and perhaps staffing for the MPO within its existing structure, or (3) designating an existing entity as the MPO. For this reason, some MPOs have the phrase “metropolitan planning organization” in their name, but many other MPOs have names that reflect their history or the other agency roles that they play (“regional planning commission,” “council of governments,” etc.).

Almost 70 percent of MPOs are hosted by another entity, which has the power to hire and fire MPO employees. The remaining 31 percent of MPOs are stand alone or independent entities. Generally, larger MPOs are more likely to be independent. A 2017 study describes a continuum of independence for MPOs, ranging from MPOs that are fully merged with a host to MPOs that are fully independent, with three intermediate stages. Of hosted MPOs, 39 percent are hosted by a regional council, 35 percent by a municipal government, and 17 percent by a county government.



In understanding the roles and nature of MPOs, it is useful to also understand the variety of other types of government agencies that work in the regional planning and regional transportation arena. Because states vary greatly in how they structure regional planning and responsibilities, there is significant variation in what regional agencies look like and how their roles are allocated in different states. Key types of regional agencies include:

- **Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs):** Federally mandated entities tasked with transportation planning in urbanized areas with populations over 50,000. MPOs develop policies for federal transportation spending. In areas with 200,000 people or more (Transportation Management Areas), MPOs administer federal transportation dollars.
- **Regional transportation planning organizations (RTPOs or TPOs):** Federal law provides states with the option of establishing regional transportation planning organizations to ensure that the needs of non-metropolitan areas are fully incorporated into statewide long range transportation plans and transportation improvement programs. (See sidebar on page 9 for further description.) In some states, these are known as rural transportation planning organizations. Some variation of rural or regional transportation planning agencies exists in many states to support state departments of transportation with rural transportation planning.
- **Regional DOT offices:** In some states, the state department of transportation divides the state into regions and/or districts. Regional and district offices implement projects within the appropriate boundaries, which may or may not align with MPO and RTPO boundaries.
- **Councils of government (COGs):** COGs are agencies whose membership comprises most or all of the local governments in a region. COGs are also often called associations of governments, regional councils, or other names. A COG enables cities, towns, and counties to work together to plan across a region. COGs may address areas such as transportation, planning, economic development, senior services, or other topics that benefit from regional governmental cooperation. COGs and MPOs are often co-located or function as a combined entity to coordinate planning for a region. MPOs that are also COGs include the Naugatuck Valley Council of Governments in Connecticut and the Tulare County Association of Governments in California.
- **Transit agencies:** Transit agencies are special purpose agencies or public benefit corporations that have authority to address needs related to public transportation. Powers of transit agencies may include owning and operating buses, light rail lines, subways, and the like, obtaining property through purchase or eminent domain, managing property, imposing taxes, and operating transit police. The jurisdiction of transit agencies is usually established by state law or compact, and can be coterminous with a county, several counties, several cities, or other geographies. Transit agencies often overlap geographically with other regional entities, but rarely function as a combined entity with other types of regional entities. An exception to this rule can be seen in the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Authority, a department of the City and County of San Francisco that is responsible for all ground transportation in San Francisco, including public transit, taxis, parking, traffic citations, transportation planning, and street design, including use by walking, bicycling, and motor vehicles. However, it is far more common for transit agencies to function as standalone agencies that are focused simply on public transportation.
- **Counties:** All states are divided into counties or county equivalents (Louisiana uses the term parish and Alaska uses borough). Counties have different powers in different states, but generally regulate and serve unincorporated areas within their boundaries, and may exercise some more general powers over incorporated areas. County planning offices may engage in regional planning activities within a county; county departments of transportation and/or public works may build and maintain streets within the county.
- **Other regional agencies:** Many other types of regional agencies with various powers exist. State law or interstate agreements can establish additional types of intrastate or interstate regional agencies. An example of state law introducing an additional type of regional agency can be seen in California where, beginning in the early nineties, each county was required to establish a congestion management agency to coordinate land use, air quality, and transportation planning. Various types of multistate regional authorities also exist, often with federal involvement, such as the Delta Regional Authority or Appalachian Regional Commission.



Transportation Planning for Rural Areas

In contrast to MPOs, which are required for all urbanized areas with populations over 50,000, federal law gives states the option of establishing regional transportation planning organizations, with duties that are somewhat similar to MPOs, but also have some differences.²⁵ The point of establishing a regional transportation planning organization is to ensure that the needs of rural areas are fully incorporated into state transportation planning and that nonmetropolitan local jurisdictions have an opportunity for public input and coordination on their regional transportation planning needs. Regional transportation planning organizations have a somewhat similar structure to

MPOs, with a policy committee consisting primarily of local officials and including other stakeholders, and duties that include developing regional long-range transportation plans and regional transportation improvement programs, as well as other duties to foster cooperation and support public participation.²⁶ A variety of models for structure have been used by regional transportation planning organizations in different states.²⁷

In states that do not institute regional transportation planning organizations, federal law calls for state consultation with affected nonmetropolitan local officials. States that do not designate

official regional transportation planning organizations may use other regional planning agencies to meet similar goals, such as regional divisions of the state DOT or other regional planning commissions. Nonmetropolitan and rural areas contain less than 30 percent of the population of the United States, but account for more than 95 percent of the land mass, meaning that thoughtful planning and coordination for transportation needs in these areas is crucial.

Section 3

STRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE OF MPOS

MPOs are governed by a board of directors, known as the policy board, which is generally comprised of local elected officials and representatives of transit agencies and state government. Membership of the policy board is established through the bylaws, statute, or compact that established the MPO, with some guidance in the federal statute.²⁹ To make informed decisions, board members often rely on technical committees and staff to provide them with relevant research and information. The size of an MPO's staff can range from two to hundreds of employees. In this section, we review the structures and roles that govern decision making by MPOs.

A. Governance and MPO Policy Boards

Because an MPO's jurisdiction encompasses the entire urbanized area in a metropolitan region as well as contiguous areas that are likely to become urbanized within the next 20 years, MPOs necessarily include within their boundaries one or more larger cities and any number of nearby suburban and rural cities and towns, and generally also include some unincorporated areas. Coordinating regional transportation decision-making involves not only these cities, towns, and counties, but also affects nearby communities, as well as special purpose regional agencies, such as public transportation agencies. Determining how to share decision-making among these different actors is no easy task.

Limited Federal Requirements Regarding Structure or Membership of MPO Policy Boards

Emphasizing flexibility and decision making driven by local and state considerations, federal law provides only very general guidelines regarding the membership of a policy board, leaving key aspects of decision making power to the negotiations that produce an MPO's governing bylaws, statute, or compact. Federal statute provides that the policy board of MPOs that serve as Transportation Management Areas (those with 200,000 or more inhabitants) must include not only local

elected officials and "appropriate State officials," but also public transportation providers.³⁰ Other MPOs are encouraged to also include similar representation.³¹ The requirement that the larger MPOs must include representation by providers of public transportation on their policy boards and must provide them with equal decision making rights and authorities to other members was added by the 2012 federal transportation bill Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21),

as part of a shift to a performance management framework requiring a more multimodal focus.³² However, significant local authority remains to determine how many representatives of public transportation providers will be included and how voting weight will be allocated.

Taking advantage of the flexibility offered by federal law, and reflecting local and state power struggles, policy boards for MPOs around the country have very different structures, membership, and voting allocations. A 2017 Federal Highway Administration report found that MPO policy board size ranged from three to 105 voting members.^{33, 34} The median was 17 members, with MPOs representing larger regions and populations tending to have more board members.³⁵ Federal law requires that voting membership on MPO boards serving Transportation Management Areas must include local elected officials, transit agencies, and state officials. The state officials that are included are generally state department of transportation representatives (found on 76 percent of MPO boards) and more rarely gubernatorial appointees (on four percent of MPO boards).³⁶ MPO boards may include a wide range of other voting members, such as representatives of toll authorities, airport or port authorities, school boards, tribal governments, colleges, military sites, and additional nearby jurisdictions not within the MPO area.³⁷ Boards often also include non-voting board members. These may commonly be additional local government representatives, federal representatives such as regional Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) or Federal Transit Administration (FTA) officers, or any of a wide variety of other types of non-voting members.³⁸

According to a 2006 Brookings Institution analysis, large central urban cities control 29 percent of MPO board votes, but contain 56 percent of MPO area population, meaning that the interests and needs of central city residents, often communities of color, are significantly underrepresented.⁴⁵ The result may be a favoring of investments in highways at the expense of investments in transit.

An inherent challenge in MPO board structure and decision making is the need to balance the voice of one or more highly populated cities with the voices of the more numerous smaller cities, suburbs, and rural towns in an MPO region. Allocating votes based simply on population might utterly drown out the influence of smaller cities, suburbs, and rural areas; allocating equal voting to each jurisdiction regardless of size grossly underweights the needs of large urban populations. This challenge is further complicated by the voting members on MPO boards who don't have such geographic restrictions, such as state officials or regional transit providers.

Although there is great variation in MPO board structure, a few different approaches to the challenge described above emerge: some boards provide at least one seat for each local government, regardless of size; others provide a certain number of seats to groupings of smaller local governments, with rotating membership, while providing permanent seats for representatives of major cities. Methods for allocating the rotating seats vary widely, from formal rotation among jurisdictions, to casual agreement, and more.

Board Composition of Multistate MPOs

A 2006 report that looked at multi-state MPOs found that there were three types of board composition: boards with equal numbers of representatives from each state; boards with representation based upon the populations of participating jurisdictions; and boards that included representatives from all jurisdictions.³⁹

Most MPOs provide one vote per seat and count votes equally.⁴⁰ Where the population of different cities is factored in to MPO decision making structures, it is usually reflected in additional seats for larger jurisdictions.⁴¹ A 2018 straw poll found that approximately 27 percent of MPOs provided additional seats for some jurisdictions, usually simply allocating additional seats to larger population jurisdictions.⁴² Analyses indicate that 13 percent of all MPOs use weighted votes – allocating more voting weight to the votes of some members than others – to account for population, but that in MPOs with populations of more than one million, 26 percent used weighted voting.^{43, 44}



A 2006 Brookings Institution analysis found that in many metropolitan regions, MPO boards “simply are not structured to adequately represent the needs of central city residents.”⁴⁶ The analysis found that urban jurisdictions received 29 percent of MPO board votes, but contained 56 percent of the MPO area population, significantly under-representing the urban populations of large MPOs, and leading to high underrepresentation of the interests and needs of residents of color.⁴⁷ Related analyses showed that the imbalance is correlated with priorities for investment of transportation funds, with each additional suburban vote on an MPO board leading to up to nine percent more funding allocated to highways rather than transit.⁴⁸ Examples of MPOs with voting structures that balance between urban and suburban areas show around 50 percent of investments going to transit; MPOs with suburban dominated voting show only nine to 18 percent of funds allocated to transit.⁴⁹

One implication of this analysis is that one of the most effective changes that advocates for multimodalism could execute would be to change the voting structure of MPOs. Federal law permits some modifications of policy board membership and voting without need for re-designation of an MPO.



Greater Portland's MPO

Greater Portland's MPO, known as Portland Metro or Metro, has the only directly elected MPO policy board in the country. The MPO's region covers urban portions of the three counties in the Portland region: Multnomah County, Clackamas County, and Washington County. The policy board is known as Metro Council, and it has a president, who is elected by voters on a region-wide basis, and six councilors, who each represent a district within the region and are elected by voters in their district.

The MPO also has a highly powerful Joint Policy Advisory Committee on Transportation (JPACT), which recommends priorities and develops plans for the region. The Metro Council must adopt the recommendations before they become transportation policies. JPACT has 17 members who are elected officials or representatives of transportation agencies across the region. Each county has a representative, as do the cities of Portland and Vancouver; the

remaining cities in each county jointly have a representative. JPACT is chaired by a Metro Council member, and there are two additional Metro Council representatives on JPACT. Other members represent both Oregon and Washington State DOTs, public transit agencies, and others. There is also a technical advisory committee (TPAC), which provides input to JPACT.

B. Bylaws, Metropolitan Planning Agreements, and Resolutions

MPO activities may be directed and constrained by specific agreements. Federal regulations call for the MPO, state, and public transportation providers to develop a Metropolitan Planning Agreement (or agreements) to summarize their respective responsibilities with regard to the planning processes, as well as to provide for the development of financial plans, long range transportation plans, and transportation improvement programs.⁵⁰ Additional agreements may be required for MPOs with air quality challenges or under other circumstances.⁵¹ MPO boards may also adopt their own bylaws. MPOs may also adopt board resolutions or board policies. Such resolutions may simply operate as the mechanism by which the MPO policy board executes its core duties, or may be means of taking specific optional policy positions, such as adopting a Complete Streets resolution that commits staff to developing street design standards that accommodate all users.⁵²

C. Staff

Most MPOs have a director and a variety of staff people. The size of MPO staff ranges from one staff person to 105 staff people.⁵³ Twenty-five percent of MPOs have fewer than three staff people, 50 percent of MPOs have between three and 12 staff people, and the remainder have more than 12.⁵⁴ MPOs are permitted to use staff resources of other agencies to carry out selected elements of the planning process.⁵⁵ MPOs also frequently rely upon consultants for a variety of services, with MPOs spending 30 percent of their budgets on consulting firms for services such as engineering, planning, or public engagement.⁵⁶

D. Advisory Committees

Advisory commitments are another common feature of MPOs. These committees often work with staff to provide recommendations, expert input, draft MPO deliverables and advise the policy board. Advisory commitments are not required by federal law, but may be set out in state law. For example, Ohio requires its MPOs to each appoint a technical advisory committee (TAC).⁵⁷ These committees are the most common type of advisory committee around the nation, with 92 percent of MPOs having TACs.⁵⁸ TACs include local transportation engineers and planners and provide technical expertise to inform the policy board's decision making.

Other types of advisory committees are also relatively common: a 2017 analysis found that 35 percent of MPOs have bicycle/pedestrian/multimodal advisory committees, and 32 percent have citizen advisory committees.⁶¹ Other than the TAC, these percentages are lower than they were in the 2010 study.⁶² Some MPOs have equity-focused advisory committees. Other committees may also be established. For example, the Oahu Metropolitan Planning Organization has a technical advisory committee, a citizen advisory committee, and a citizen advisory committee subcommittee on pedestrian safety.⁶³

Equity Advisory Committee

Metropolitan Council, the MPO for the Twin Cities region of Minnesota, formed an Equity Advisory Committee in 2015 with the intent to “create more equitable outcomes for the people who live and work in the region.”⁵⁹ Members of the Equity Advisory Committee represent eight geographic divisions of the region and special attention is made to ensure there is representation from the following groups: “African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, immigrants and new Americans, low-wealth residents, and people with disabilities.”⁶⁰ The advisory committee gives input in a wide range of cross cutting issues.



E. Funding

Funding for MPO operations and activities come from a variety of places. All MPOs receive a share of their state's federal funding from the Metropolitan Planning set-aside, commonly referred to as "PL" funds, which forms at least half of MPO funding for most MPOs.^{64, 65} Most MPOs also receive federal Metropolitan Transit Planning funds, known as section 5305 funds, which are intended to support transit planning in metro areas. These two types of funding may be combined into a single Consolidated Planning Grant.

MPOs also receive federal funds under the Surface Transportation Block Grant Program-Urban Allocation (STBGP), with MPOs that serve TMAs directly receiving a special set aside from the STBGP.⁶⁶ The other primary source of federal funding for MPOs is available for MPOs in areas that do not meet air quality standards. Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funds can be applied to a variety of uses to improve air quality, such as project implementation, public education, and MPO planning.⁶⁷ Other sources of funding for MPOs include funding or operational support from state and local governments. Local funds may go to meet federal match requirements, supplement federal money to comply with federally required duties, or support additional activities outside core federal duties.⁶⁸ MPOs may also obtain competitive grants or engage in contract work.





MPO-Related Definitions

Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO): Federally mandated entity created by state and regional agreement tasked with transportation planning for urbanized area with population over 50,000.

Regional Transportation Planning Organization (also known as Rural Transportation Planning Organization) (RTPO or TPO): Entity that may optionally be established under federal law to assist states with ensuring that the needs of non-metropolitan areas are fully incorporated into **statewide long range transportation plans (SLRTPs) and state transportation improvement programs (STIPs).**

Transportation Management Area (TMA): Urbanized area with populations of more than 200,000.

Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP): Long-term transportation plan for the MPO region with at least a 20-year horizon, revised every three to five years.

Transportation Improvement Program (TIP): Fiscally constrained list of transportation infrastructure projects that are prioritized for funding in the short term, usually within four years.

Statewide Long Range Transportation Plans (SLRTPs): State plan that provides long-range planning for the statewide multimodal transportation system and incorporates MPO LRTP.

State Transportation Improvement Programs (STIPs): State list of prioritized short-term transportation projects that incorporates TIPs developed at the MPO level.

State Improvement Program (SIP): Federally required state air quality plan developed by state environmental or air quality agency.

Policy Board: The decision making body for an MPO.

Unified Work Planning Program: Work plan required of MPOs describing funds and planning activities intended for implementation over the next one to two years.

Congestion Management Process: Federally mandated process requiring that an MPO systematically assesses performance of regional transportation system and develops strategies to mitigate traffic congestion.

Technical Advisory Committee (TAC): Type of advisory committee established by most MPOs to get technical input from members, generally engineers, planners, and others working for local jurisdictions in the MPO service area.

Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC): Type of advisory committee often established by MPOs to obtain input from nonprofits and committee members concerned with safe and accessible walking, bicycling, and micromobility within the MPO boundaries.

Urbanized area: Densely settled area with at least 50,000 residents.

Section 4

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES: WHAT MPOS DO

Federal law designates a number of roles for MPOs generally, and sets out a variety of additional roles for the larger MPOs that serve Transportation Management Areas. All MPOs must engage in specified planning, evaluation, and funding activities. MPO roles are guided and supplemented by regulations and practices at the state, regional, or local level, and MPOs may have additional roles assigned to them by state government.

A. Core Transportation Planning Duties

The central responsibility for an MPO is to engage in coordinated short- and long-term transportation planning processes. These processes determine which projects receive federal and state transportation funding. Under federal law, **MPOs' planning processes must comply with three-C planning requirements: continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive planning.**⁶⁹ These core regional transportation planning functions occur through a process that includes: visioning and scenario exploration; community engagement; regular development and updating of both long-term plans and short-term lists of infrastructure projects to implement; and monitoring, data collection, and reporting. The FHWA and FTA provide funding toward these planning processes.⁷⁰ Although exact processes differ from MPO to MPO, all MPOs engage in a planning process with regular opportunities for input by local jurisdictions and the public.

As part of their ongoing and extensive planning process, MPOs develop and update three key regional planning documents, which provide for transportation planning and schedule the allocation of federal dollars toward regional projects. Although these three documents are technically required of all MPOs, MPOs serving areas that are not Transportation Management Areas may submit streamlined documentation under some conditions.^{71, 72}

Long Range Transportation Plans Ensure Continuous Long-Term Regional Planning

MPOs must engage in long range planning for their regions by developing and regularly updating **long range transportation plans (L RTPs).**⁷³ L RTPs are known by different names in different jurisdictions, including metropolitan area plans, metropolitan transportation plans (MTPs), regional transportation plans (RTPs), and others. These plans must have time frames (horizons) of at least 20 years, and must be regularly updated; at least every five years, and every four years for areas that have not met certain air quality standards.⁷⁴ As a practical matter, this means that once an MPO adopts its plan looking 20 or 30 years into the future, it will more or less immediately begin to work on its next long-range plan, since the new plan will be adopted in three to five years and the community engagement, data analysis, and adoption process can all be lengthy. As a result, although each plan considers a 20 plus year horizon, it only holds sway for four or five years, and opportunities for influencing the direction of the L RTP regularly arise.

Although a long range transportation plan sets out and plans for goals, objectives, and projects over at least a 20-year time frame, **any given plan only holds sway for four or five years before a new or revised plan is adopted.** As a result, opportunities for influencing the direction of the L RTP regularly arise.



L RTPs generally begin with a vision, developed through public involvement, and a variety of goals and objectives that flow from that vision. As part of the LRTP process, MPOs may, but are not required to, engage in a best practice known as scenario planning, in which performance measures for multiple scenarios are compared with one another to identify pros and cons of different planning directions. As of 2017, almost 60 percent of MPOs used scenario planning in developing plans.⁷⁵

A variety of specific components are required for an LRTP:

- LRTPs must identify all of the core transportation facilities, including transit and multimodal facilities, that need to function together as part of the integrated transportation system for the region.
- The LRTP must describe the performance measures and targets, and provide a baseline and updated evaluation of the transportation system with respect to these.
- The LRTP must also include a financial plan demonstrating how the plan can be implemented, with available and necessary resources. The projects included in an LRTP must be fiscally constrained, meaning that the proposed projects cannot cost more than available funding, although additional desired projects can be included.
- The LRTP must also include a number of additional categories of information, including: operational/programming strategies for improving performance; proposed capital investments; transit enhancement activities; and environmental mitigation measures.⁷⁶



Role for State Departments of Transportation

In a process that follows and incorporates the regional MPO planning processes, state DOTs prepare **statewide long range transportation plans (SLRTPs)**, which provide long-range planning for the **statewide multimodal transportation system, as well as state transportation improvement programs (STIPs)**. SLRTPs and STIPs incorporate LRTPs and TIPs developed at the MPO level.

Air Quality Conformity

If an MPO contains areas that have poor air quality related to specific pollutants (nonattainment areas) or areas that previously had poor air quality (maintenance areas), additional requirements apply to ensure that the MPO's activities do not undermine air quality goals.

The MPO's transportation activities, specifically the LRTP, TIP, and federally funded projects, must conform with the State Improvement Plan (SIP) for achieving air quality

standards. Under the federal Clean Air Act, states must develop SIPs, a task usually implemented by state environmental or air resources agencies.⁷⁷ The SIP sets out how the state will ensure that air quality complies with national standards for specific pollutants.⁷⁸ SIPs must be approved by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

The core goal of transportation air quality conformity requirements is

to ensure that activities and funding overseen by the federal government are consistent with air quality goals. Thus, conformity for nonattainment and maintenance areas requires that plans such as LRTPs, funding determinations such as TIPs, and projects are consistent with air quality goals as set out in the SIP, and will not cause new violations, increase the severity of violations, or delay attainment of air quality goals.⁷⁹

Transportation Improvement Programs (TIPs) Select and Prioritize Projects for Shorter Term Funding

MPOs also create lists of projects that are prioritized for funding in the short term by creating documents known as **transportation improvement programs (TIPs)**. TIPs must contain projects that are consistent with the LRTP, reflect the investment priorities of the LRTP, and are designed to take steps toward the goals set out in the performance targets.⁸⁰ These documents must be fiscally constrained, and must be updated at least every four years.⁸¹

TIPs must include:

- A priority list of projects and strategies to be developed within the following four years.
- A financial plan that demonstrates how the projects can be implemented and identifies costs and funds.
- A description sufficient to identify each proposed project.
- A description of how the TIP will contribute to achieving the performance targets from the LRTP.⁸²

Projects must be contained within the TIP in order to receive FHWA and FTA funds, and the same is generally true for state transportation funds. The approval process for a TIP is convoluted. Generally, projects included in the TIP have been coordinated with the state DOT to ensure that they are consistent with the state transportation improvement program (STIP).⁸³ After approval by the MPO board, the TIP must be approved by the state governor.⁸⁴ It is then incorporated into the STIP without revisions. The STIP requires joint approval from the FHWA and FTA, after which federal funds may be released for approved state and regional projects.

The Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) Provides a Yearly Workplan

A final product that MPOs must regularly develop is the unified planning work program (UPWP), an annual or biennial work plan identifying the planning work to be carried out by the MPO within the next one to two years. Work must be identified by activity and task, indicating who is responsible for performing the work, the schedule, the deliverables, and the proposed funding divided out by funding sources.⁸⁵ The UPWP must identify planning tasks and studies to be conducted, air quality planning tasks, federally funded studies, and so on. UPWPs provide a snapshot of the budget for an MPO's planning activities, as well as an overview of work being done by consultants for the MPO.⁸⁶



B. Additional Duties for MPOs Serving Transportation Management Areas

MPOs in urbanized areas with more than 200,000 people (Transportation Management Areas) have additional duties that are not required of MPOs in areas with 50,000 to 200,000 people. As noted above, somewhere around half of MPOs serve such areas.



The duties of MPOs serving Transportation Management Areas include:

- **Competitively award Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funds:** Since 2012, MPOs serving Transportation Management Areas have been responsible for competitively allocating a portion of their state's federal TAP funds. These funds are to be used for walking and bicycling infrastructure projects as well as for infrastructure and programs supporting Safe Routes to School. MPOs run TAP competitions, award funding, and ensure proper use of funds for implementation. The amount received by each MPO is based upon the population within its boundaries.
- **Directly fund projects with Surface Transportation Block Grant Program (STBGP) funds:** MPOs serving TMAs receive a suballocation from federal Surface Transportation Block Grant Program (STBGP) funds provided to the state.⁸⁷ The amount of the suballocation is based upon the MPO's share of the population of the state. In consultation with the DOT, the MPO has direct authority to fund projects from its approved TIP with these funds.⁸⁸ Other STBGP funds may optionally be provided to smaller MPOs by the state DOT.
- **Manage congestion:** MPOs serving TMAs are required by law to undertake a Congestion Management Process (CMP),⁸⁹ which must systematically assess the performance of a transportation system in a region, and devise strategies to mitigate traffic congestion, including travel demand reduction, job access projects, and operational management approaches.^{90, 91} MPOs often see non-motorized transportation improvements as a strategy to mitigate traffic congestion. Although CMPs must be integrated into the transportation planning process, there is flexibility regarding how they are structured and implemented, meaning that the CMP process may be entirely incorporated into other planning processes such as the LRTP and TIP,⁹² or may occur as a standalone process that influences other processes.⁹³



C. Additional Federal Requirements

MPOs have a range of additional duties under federal law. These duties are intended to increase collaboration, public input, transportation equity, and coordination toward public goals. Some MPOs treat these duties as compliance requirements to check off; others engage deeply in an effort to implement the spirit of the requirements.

- **Public/stakeholder consultation, outreach, and involvement:** MPOs operate under a variety of public involvement requirements.⁹⁴ Despite this, MPO processes tend to be quite opaque and confusing for the public. The specialized nature of MPO duties and the long lapse between input and implementation may contribute to the sense of low levels of public engagement.

Federal regulations require that MPOs develop a documented public involvement process.⁹⁵ All MPOs must conduct proactive public engagement around TIPs, LRTPs, and other activities, which must commence early and be ongoing and collaborative. MPOs that serve TMAs must memorialize their practices in a formal written Public Involvement Plan. The process must provide opportunities for involvement in the transportation planning process for a range of listed stakeholders, from individuals, to transit and freight interests, to representatives of people who bicycle, walk, use transit, and have disabilities.⁹⁶ Plans must set out how various requirements will be addressed, such as:

- Providing timely information & access to background information
- Holding public meetings at convenient times and locations
- Seeking out and considering the needs of traditionally under-served populations
- Demonstrating consideration of and reporting on response to comments received

Other requirements also support transparency and accountability. For example, each year, MPOs are required to publish a listing of all projects, including bicycle and pedestrian investments, for which federal funds have been obligated in the preceding year.





- **Equity requirements:** MPOs are required to comply with environmental justice mandates and with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which states: “No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” MPOs must develop regular Title VI Program Plans that spell out how they will assure compliance with nondiscrimination mandates. Among other requirements, MPOs must consider, and take steps to reduce, how transportation improvements (or lack thereof) disproportionately burden low-income populations and communities of color.
- **Air quality:** Under the Clean Air Act, there are requirements to ensure that MPOs avoid decisions or actions that may worsen poor or borderline air quality. For MPOs that contain areas determined to have inadequate air quality, known as nonattainment areas, MPOs must ensure that their LRTPs, TIPs, and projects comply with State Improvement Plans (SIPs) to attain improved air quality. MPOs in areas that were previously nonattainment areas (maintenance areas) must also demonstrate transportation conformity. SIPs set out “budgets” for on-road mobile source emissions.

Affected MPOs must conduct detailed conformity analyses for plans and projects, in compliance with very specific requirements. MPO policy boards must make an initial transportation conformity determination for their LRTPs and TIPs, showing that total projected emissions are within the SIP’s allotted budget for their region. , Final conformity is determined by the FHWA. If conformity is not properly established or has expired, following a grace period, an area will be found to suffer a conformity lapse. During a conformity lapse, most FHWA or FTA federal funding cannot be used, with limited exceptions.

- **Measure performance goals:** Federal law requires MPOs to set performance goals. For example, as part of Highway Safety Improvement Program safety targets, MPOs must establish goals regarding the number of fatalities, rate of fatalities, number of serious injuries, rate of serious injuries, and number of non-motorized fatalities and non-motorized serious injuries. MPOs use data to inform the prioritization and selection of transportation projects in a region.
- **Administer federal transportation funds:** As noted above, MPOs may also have authority over distinct pots of federal transportation funds. In addition to those noted above, other federal funds may also be provided to or coordinated with MPOs, including specific public transportation funds (FTA section 5307 funds) and funds to improve mobility for people with disabilities and seniors (section 5310).



D. Additional MPO Activities

MPO Duties Under State Law

Because states create MPOs, they can also establish additional roles and responsibilities for them beyond those established by federal law. As a result, a particular MPO may play additional important roles beyond those that most MPOs have.

Examples of additional responsibilities of this nature include:

- **In Texas, House Bill 20, passed in 2015,** requires each MPO to develop a 10-Year Plan of projects.¹⁰⁵ The first four years of the plan qualifies as the TIP, and the remainder allows mid-range planning by the region and state.
- **In California, state law (SB 375)** requires MPOs to develop Sustainable Communities Strategies (SCSs) as part of LRTPs.¹⁰⁶ Each region is provided with collaboratively determined climate emission reduction targets, and the Sustainable Communities Strategy must demonstrate how the region will meet those targets, or must set out alternative planning strategies that would do so. The SCS must address housing needs and transportation emissions, and must quantify the climate emission reductions projected by the SCS. Transportation funding decisions in the LRTP must be consistent with the SCS; that also means that TIPs must be consistent with the SCS.
- **In Oregon, a comprehensive state land use planning regulatory framework** imposes specific requirements on MPOs, among others.^{107,108} Oregon's Transportation Planning Rule requires that MPOs plan for reduced automobile reliance and an increase in transportation mode choices.¹⁰⁹ The rule also requires consistency between MPOs' LRTPs and local jurisdictions' required transportation system plans, which introduces new requirements for consultation, coordination, and negotiation.¹¹⁰



Additional Roles for MPOs

Where MPOs have funding and are not precluded by state restrictions, they may choose to engage in a variety of additional areas of activity. Because regional transportation planning is deeply interconnected with other state, regional, and local challenges and goals, there are many additional areas where MPOs have the relationships, structure, and know-how to play a key role.

A few examples include:

- **Regional agreements to work together:** MPOs can enter into agreements with each other or with other entities to work in a larger regional capacity on areas of interest—climate change, economic development, housing, and more.
- **Awarding regional funding:** MPOs can work with stakeholders and local jurisdictions to plan and structure local taxes or other mechanisms to raise new local funding for transportation projects. MPOs may be designated as responsible for the administration of such funds.¹¹¹
- **Resources, templates, and technical assistance to local member governments:** MPOs often provide assistance to their member communities, particularly on emerging issues beyond the immediate expertise of local communities. For example, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission in Pennsylvania developed a series of model ordinance frameworks on alternative energy, to assist municipalities in easily tailoring ordinances for adoption that would provide for solar deployment throughout the region.¹¹²
- **Maps and analyses:** MPOs have access to enormous amounts of data, and are required by federal law to make transportation data meaningful to the public and stakeholders through a variety of visualization methods. This means that MPOs also have the capacity to translate data in related arenas. MPOs develop maps and analyses to assist other agencies and decision makers in understanding data and resources. Some MPOs also develop maps to help residents to access available resources.
- **Policy decisions:** MPOs can adopt a wide array of policies to spell out how they will conduct their activities. For example, many MPOs have adopted Complete Streets policies. MPOs can adopt policies committing to specific objectives or supporting issues such as Vision Zero or Safe Routes to School.



Section 5

PROCESS FOR INFLUENCE: HOW CAN HEALTH, EQUITY, AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION STAKEHOLDERS INFLUENCE MPOS?

Many MPOs have not historically considered health, active transportation, or equity as key goals or targets, and have not factored these considerations into their activities beyond a cursory compliance with legal requirements. Over the past ten years, many MPOs have begun to engage with these concerns more significantly. In looking to influence MPOs, in some communities, stakeholders may need to focus on establishing relationships with staff and MPO board members, working to lay the groundwork for changes. In some communities, stakeholders will be able to work with staff on early actions and small modifications to existing processes.¹¹³ And in some communities, stakeholders will be able to work with MPOs to create more significant alternations to ongoing processes and structural changes that will center health and equity in a meaningful way.



How can you get started on engaging and influencing your MPO?

- 1. First, educate yourself.** Understand the basics about your MPO – what region does it serve, how is decision making structured on its policy board, what advisory boards and other structures are there, and what opportunities exist to influence the board? Talk to advocates and political leaders who can provide perspective on the competing currents and priorities within your MPO's leadership.
- 2. Begin to build relationships.** Meet with MPO staff and identify allies. Determine whether the MPO policy board member representing your jurisdiction is likely to be friendly to your general goals, and cultivate a relationship with that member, their staff, and other members who are supportive of health.
- 3. Determine a feasible yet ambitious goal.** Now that you understand the roles that MPOs can play generally and how your MPO works and leans specifically, select one or several goals that you would like to see your MPO implement. Maybe this is including funding for a protected bike lane or sidewalks on a school route in the transportation improvement program (TIP), or the prioritization of walking and biking routes to healthy food venues.
- 4. Build good will and influence.** Becoming appointed to an advisory committee can be a good way to begin to influence internal processes for your MPO, strengthen relationships with staff, and advocate for your goals. There are other opportunities for public input as well.
- 5. Work toward short-term and long-term goals.** Advocate for short-term wins while also supporting structural changes that will create more community voice and higher prioritization of health and equity.

As this report sets out, MPOs play a crucial role in influencing health and regional investments in bicycling, walking, and Safe Routes to School. By understanding the responsibilities and activities of MPOs, health and active transportation stakeholders can develop a clearer conception of the significance of this arena of regional decision making, and can better understand how and why to get involved to advance health for their region's children, families, and communities.



For more insight and ideas regarding how MPO staff advance health and some promising and innovative practices seen in MPOs around the country, explore our companion report, **[Metropolitan Planning Organizations and Health 201: Best Practices & Promising Opportunities for Health](#)**



Endnotes

- ¹ 49 USC §5303 (d)(1).
- ² U.S. Department of Transportation, “Metropolitan Planning Organization Database,” <https://www.planning.dot.gov/mpo.asp>. Oddly, the exact number of MPOs is hard to pin down. A 2014 resource stated: “of the approximately 420 MPOs throughout the Nation, approximately 210 MPOs serve an area designated as a TMA,” <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2014/06/02/2014-12163/policy-guidance-on-metropolitan-planning-organization-mpo-representation>. A 2017 resource described 409 MPOs and found 399 to be distinct.
- ³ E.g., the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board in DC and the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments. U.S. Department of Transportation, “Metropolitan Planning Organization Database,” <https://www.planning.dot.gov/mpo.asp>.
- ⁴ Census Bureau, “2010 Census Urban Area Facts,” <https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/ua/uafacts.html>.
- ⁵ Census Bureau, “2010 Census Urban and Rural Classification and Urban Area Criteria,” <https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/ua/urban-rural-2010.html>. Urbanized areas have one or more incorporated central places and include the surrounding densely settled area known as the urban fringe that contains at least 1000 people per square mile. U.S. Department of Transportation, “2017 National Transit Database Glossary,” <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/2017%20Glossary.pdf>.
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- ¹⁵ Richard F. Weingroff, “The Battle of Its Life,” FHWA-HRT-06-004 Vol. 69 No. 6, May/June 2006, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/06may/05.cfm>.
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- ²² Kramer, Jeff, et al., “MPO Staffing and Organizational Structures,” Federal Highway Administration, 2017 (update to 2010 report on Staffing and Administrative Capacity of Metropolitan Planning Organizations), https://www.planning.dot.gov/documents/MPOStaffing_and_Org_Structures.pdf. The five stages are: fully merged; dual purpose; MPO as component; leaning independent, and fully independent.
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